



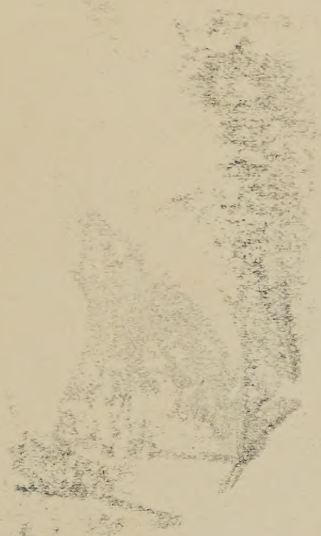
The
FLYING MACHINE
BOYS
IN MEXICO



BY FRANK WALTON

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The airman approached the island on a long, easy slant, the boys watching with eager eyes. Page 11.

The Flying Machine Boys in Mexico.

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OR

The Secret of the Crater

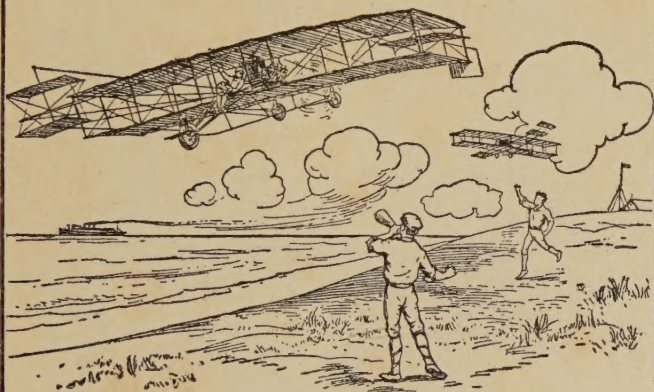
By FRANK WALTON

AUTHOR OF

"The Flying Machine Boys on Secret Service"

"The Flying Machine Boys in the Wilds"

"The Flying Machine Boys on Duty"



A.L. BURT COMPANY
NEW YORK.

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THE FLYING MACHINE BOYS IN MEXICO

THE FLYING MACHINE BOYS IN MEXICO

CHAPTER I.

A SHIP OUT OF THE SKY.

A MOTOR boat of small size lay pounding in the surf. To the north, east, and south, the blue Atlantic stretched away to the skyline. To the west, or to the northwest, to be more exact, ran the jagged coast of the State of Maine. Above, moved a threatening sky; below, lay a sandy island of few acres in area.

The motor boat was going to pieces on ragged, half-submerged rocks which rimmed the island on the east. Now and then the craft plunged at the rocks as if determined to beat them down and gain the level sand beyond, but the boulders struck hard and the surf pulled strongly, so she soon swung to seaward again and gathered, wounded, for another leap at the barrier.

Three lads of sixteen years were clinging to the rocks, watching their last hope go to wreck. They

were Ben Whitcomb, James Stuart, and Carl Nichols, all residents of the city of New York.

The rocks where the three boys clung were not more than six feet above the level of the ocean at ebb tide, the sandy expanse behind them not half of that. Even at half tide the island would be inundated, and so the lads were trying to rescue the motor boat from the waves in order that they might have the floating wreckage to cling to when the tide came sweeping in.

They had left Portland early that morning in the open motor boat for the purpose of looking up a small island where a club of New York boys might spend a few weeks during the blistering summer period, when the steel and stones of the big city radiate heat like a baker's oven. Not far from this sandy island, which has no place on the map, and is therefore nameless, the boat had struck a submerged boulder.

By great good luck the lads had succeeded in gaining the island at a point to the south of the breakers, but they had been unable to rescue anything whatever from the boat, the bottom of which had been nearly torn away in the head-on collision with the hidden rock. For the present they were safe enough, though drenched to the skin with chill salt water, and exhausted from their long struggle with the surf.

But the low-lying island could not shelter them

for long. It was two o'clock of an afternoon about the middle of May, and their place of refuge would soon be under six feet of rushing water. Besides, there was nothing to eat, and the threatening clouds skurrying above forecast a cold and stormy night. The situation was indeed a trying one.

"Oh, this is life on the ocean wave, all right!" Jimmie Stuart said, a little pucker coming between his red eyebrows. "How would you like a look-in at the old room on Seventeenth street, kids, the one overlooking the twin squares? And the restaurant down by Tammany hall! What?"

"We're having troubles of our own," replied Ben Whitcomb, "without your piling it on. If we don't get our fingers on that wreck, or sight a sailing vessel pretty soon, there'll never be any more twin squares or Tammany hall for us! Doesn't that look like a banner of smoke, there, off to the south? Boat coming this way, do you think?"

"Steamer going to Portland, probably," Carl Nichols, short, fat, blue-eyed and round of face, cut in. "Anyway it's not coming this way."

The three boys swept the sky in all directions with their eyes all to no purpose. There were streamers of smoke outlined against the clouds occasionally, but no craft moved toward them. They were out of the line of travel, as they naturally would be, looking, as they had been, for a lonely island which no one claimed.

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"We may be able to reach the wreck when the tide comes in," Jimmy continued. "The currents may drive it off the breakers, so we can get to it. I can't see why they won't, can you, boys?"

"When the tide begins to come in strongly," Ben grumbled, "it will sweep the wreck off to the mainland. We never can get hold of it, never."

"When is it full tide here?" asked Carl, anxiously.

"About seven o'clock," Ben replied. "And it comes in nine feet high at Portland, so it will be a little higher up here. It is all up with us, I take it! We never should have come off alone in that boat."

"Don't you ever think it is all off with us!" Jimmie cried. "I'm not ready to give up yet. I'll give the old Atlantic a fight, anyway."

"Much good that will do!" Ben complained, leaving the rock where he had been clinging and moving off to the level stretch of sand.

"I tell you that we're going to get out of this!" Jimmie insisted, with a broad smile on his freckled face. "If a ship has to sail out of the sky and pick us up, we'll be taken off this island before the tide covers it! I'm a seventh son of a seventh son, and I know!"

Carl laughed at the comical expression on the boy's face, but Ben walked over to the other side of the narrow island, as if to escape the optimistic

predictions of the lad. Jimmie had been a news-boy in New York for many years, and had never learned to look out for the next day or the next week.

He had always been a favorite with his street companions because of his happy-go-lucky disposition. If he earned a dollar one day he spent it before he slept, every cent of it, happy in the belief that he would earn as much on the following day. He was always predicting pleasant happenings; never troubling his mind with unpleasant ones until he stood face to face with them. Then he met them bravely, and with a smile, as the manly boy does in every instance.

Ben was really as courageous and resourceful in the face of difficulties as was Jimmie, but he was inclined to look on the dark side of life, and to anticipate the worst that could possibly happen. This disposition, however, was not altogether without its benefits, for it caused the lad to provide for the emergencies he forecast, and so he was usually able to assist any of his friends in a "pinch."

He was taller and heavier than either of his companions, and was one of the noted juvenile athletes of the lower East side. His complexion was somewhat dusky, but clear, and his brown eyes were bright and kindly. Jimmie Stuart was shorter than Ben, but fully as active. His blonde hair was always in the way, and his blue eyes snapped

with mischief and "get up and get," as the boys called his vitality when in action.

Carl Nichols, the short, fleshy lad, was a devoted friend of both Ben and Jimmie, and shared in an equal degree the peculiarities of each. He saved a little, like Ben, and saw only golden sky for the morrow, like Jimmie. Now he stood for a moment pulling Jimmie by the sleeve.

"What's that you said about an airship?" he asked. "Did you say one was coming out of the sky to take us off? How do you know?"

"That was for Ben's benefit!" Jimmie replied. "He needs a little cheering up! When it comes right down to a fight with the sea, he'll do more than both of us, but now he's got the mollygrubs!"

"There's a steamer coming this way, boys!" now shouted Ben, running from the other side of the island. "It looks as if it was headed for this very island. If we could only signal her!"

He drew off his wet coat and swung it wildly in the air as he spoke. In this he was imitated by Jimmie and Carl, both of whom added their voices to the demonstration. Ben smiled at this last effort to attract the attention of those on board the steamer.

"Of course they can hear you!" he grinned. "The steamer is only about three miles off! You might as well call out to Battery Park to send a tug up after you. Swing your coats! Swing hard and high!"

"It does us good to yell, anyway," declared Carl, "and doesn't cost a cent. Come on, Jimmie! Turn her loose!"

"And the two boys did "turn her loose" until the heavy air echoed and re-echoed with their fresh young voices. Ben finally added his own voice to those of his companions, and they made a chorus of wild calls which might have been heard a long distance off.

But it was not heard on board the steamer, evidently, for the pillar of smoke turned toward Penobscot Bay and grew smaller and smaller.

"Go it!" yelled Jimmie, as if expecting the steamer to hear and understand his taunts, "you ain't so much! Guess we can get off this little old hump of sand in spite of you. Go it, you snake, go it!"

"She's going it, all right!" laughed Carl. "She never noticed us."

"None of them will!" Ben grumbled. "We'll have to take to the water at the last moment and try to swim ashore. Nothing else for it!"

"How far should you say it was?" asked Carl. "A mile or so?"

"Two miles at least," Ben answered. "We might be able to keep up on the swift tide, but it is the landing I'm thinking about! There are teeth to all the islands along the shore, and sharp ones at that."

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"No long swim for me!" Jimmie grinned. "Didn't I tell you we'd be taken off before the tide reached the full, even if a ship had to come sailing out of the sky to do the job?"

Ben laughed at the insistence with which the boy stuck to this previously expressed opinion. In trying times it is cheering to find some one who is firm in the belief that all will yet end well!

"Your flying machine will have to come down pretty soon," Carl said, actually looking into the swiftly moving clouds above, as if expecting to see an aeroplane drifting toward them. "It is beginning to get dusk, and we won't be in sight long now. The sun sets at seven, and the tide comes at that time, the full head of it, I mean."

"What in the Old Scratch did we ever come off alone in that open motor boat for?" growled Ben. "We should have known better!"

"Say! Say!" called Carl, almost breathless with excitement. "Look up in the sky! Is that a flying machine, or a bird?"

"A bird, of course," Ben exclaimed. "You don't think Jimmie's flying machine is actually coming, do you?" he added, with a smile.

Jimmie looked long in the direction indicated by Carl's pointing finger. He became excited, too, but he said nothing for a moment.

"That is a flying machine, all right," he then said, trying to speak calmly, "and it looks as if it

would pass right over us. It would be odd if one should come, after what I said, wouldn't it, fellows?"

"It may be odd, or it may be the hand of Providence," shouted Carl, "but it is coming, right here, right to this island. Do you think the man in it heard us calling to the steamer? Could he hear that far?"

"He might," replied Jimmie. "Look what the man is doing! He's coming down on a spiral! That's dangerous, old chap," he continued, as if warning the airman to take heed what he was doing.

"Surely he is coming down to our island!" Carl shouted, leaping up in the air as if he would meet the airman half way. "I guess he did hear us calling, after all. Now he's going to land! See!"

"I believe you boys called him out of the air!" Ben laughed, overjoyed at the thought of immediate rescue. "If he can't take us to shore, he can at least let the people over there know the plight we are in, so they can come off to us with a boat."

"Of course we whistled the airship out of the air!" said Jimmie, fairly dancing up and down in his excitement. "Look, if you don't believe!"

The airman had ceased his antics and was now approaching the island on a long, easy slant. The boys watched with big eyes. When the pneumatic-tired wheels struck the hard sand they speeded until

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it seemed as if they would carry the machine into the sea.

At last one of them struck a boulder which just peeped out of the sand and the airman was thrown out, the machine turned bottom up on the level surface of the little island.

“That does settle it!” Ben cried, as the airman lay perfectly still.

CHAPTER II.

“THE BURNING MOUNTAINS.”

THE boys ran to the fallen airman and bent over him anxiously. If he had indeed been seriously injured by his tumble out of his seat on the flying machine, then his strange visit would avail them nothing, for none of them could operate the aeroplane.

“He’s alive!” Jimmie cried, in a moment. “I saw him wink his other eye! I wish we had something reviving to give him,” he added, hopefully.

But the airman did not appear to require any assistance. He had received a slight bump on the head which had stunned him for a moment, but that was all. He sat up on the sand, stretched out his hands as if feeling for rain, and then slowly arose to his feet, hardly noticing the boys.

“As sure as you’re a foot high,” Jimmie whispered to Carl, “that is Louis Havens, the famous flying machine expert. Now, what is he doing here? Takes the tumble coolly, doesn’t he?”

“Perhaps he’s used to them,” suggested Carl.

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While the boys were whispering together, dreading to address the famous young aviator, that gentleman was bending over his aeroplane, which lay in quite a tangle on the sand. He looked annoyed for an instant, and then his face cleared as he righted the machine and turned toward the boys.

"It is all right!" he explained. "Now, perhaps you'll tell me what all that yelling was about? I heard it away above the clouds."

Honest!" cried Jimmie. "Did you? Then we must be some on the shout! Ben said it wouldn't do no good," he went on, with a sly dig in the ribs of the lad named. "Welcome to our midst!"

"We've been cast away on this sand bar," Carl hastened to say, as Havens looked questioningly from face to face. "We're pretty glad to see you! The steamers all went around us, and the tide is coming in."

Havens, twenty-four, tall, slender, black of eyes and hair, supple as an Indian, looked at his watch and then out to sea.

"The tide surely is coming in," he said, with a touch of anxiety in his voice, "so I've got to be getting away. There is a storm coming up, too, and I don't care to take a soaking. Where's your boat?"

Ben pointed to the wreck in the surf and Haven looked annoyed.

"A complete loss," he exclaimed. "Well, I pre-

sume I'll have to take you off. I can carry only two of you at once. Who will wait until the last journey? It will be dark before I get back, and the tide will be very high by that time; still, I can't carry you all at once. You'll have to decide among yourselves who will take the chance of being drowned."

"Why," Ben said, calmly, though his face was white as the foam on the breakers, "I'm the one to remain. If the tide comes in too strong, I can swim ashore. At least, I'm stronger than the others, and stand a better chance of getting through the surf alive. I'm the one to remain."

"Then I'll stay with you!" Jimmie said. "Mr. Haven can take two at the last trip instead of the first. I'm not going off and leave you here, and that's the end to it. Carl can go first, and we'll wait."

"It seems to me," Havens argued, "that two would better go out on the first trip. No use of risking two lives, is there, boys?"

"No risk at all," Jimmie remonstrated. "If there was, I wouldn't want to stay!" he added with a smile which his words betrayed.

"Then we'll all stay," Carl decided. "Go on away, Mr. Havens, and we'll all take chances together. We'll come out all right."

"Come," ordered Havens, annoyed at the dispute, "two of you get up on the machine, and do

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it now! I'll guarantee to bring the other off safe and sound. We haven't got any time to lose, you know."

"I'm heavier than either of the others," Ben urged, "so they'll go. I'll remain here. Here, lads, I'll help fasten you on."

"We'll hang on, so there will be no need of chaining us down," Jimmie said. "We want to drop out the minute the machine comes to the beach, so Mr. Havens can come back after you. All ready, now!"

Havens sprang into his seat, saw that Jimmie and Carl were secure in the seat next to him, their weight balanced by the motors, and turned on the power. There was a great cracking and snapping for a minute, the explosions sounding like the setting off of giant firecrackers to the unaccustomed ears of the two boys, and then the wheels started slowly over the hard sand.

The aeroplane was heavily loaded, and the wheels seemed to cling to the earth for a perilously long time, but, just as the rim of ocean was coming close, they lifted, and the flying machine swung over the troubled waters like a great bird. Jimmie tried to whisper to his chum, but the rush of air forced the words down his throat.

The aviator's face was white and drawn as he brought the machine around and headed for the shore. The expression frightened Jimmie, and he

turned and looked back. The tide was already foaming at the edge of the level where they had stood.

Then the boy understood the peril of the one left behind, the necessity for great speed if Ben's life was to be saved. The great aeroplane was not taken into the upper air. Havens swung low and headed for an island at the mouth of Penobscot Bay.

In an incredibly short space of time breakers were passed, and then the boys saw a level golf field beneath them. Havens brought the machine down swiftly, so swiftly that Jimmie and Carl were almost thrown out of their seats, shut off the power, and called out to them:

"Jump, kids, and wait here. Don't lose a minute!"

The boys were out on the ground in a second, and the aeroplane sang its sparkling song again and was away. It was now getting dusk, although the sun had not set, being hidden behind great banks of clouds. Directly the machine was only a blur in the dim sky, and then there was only the black clouds and the thunder of the surf. The boys shivered.

"I know he'll get Ben," Jimmie said, encouragingly. "If the sand is under water when he reaches the island, he'll find Ben on the rocks. You know they are higher than the surface of the island. Oh, yes, he'll bring him back, all right!"

That was a long wait, but it ended at last, when the night had shut down so that only the outlines of the distant buildings and trees could be seen, when the ocean was just a white and troubled mass which roared unceasingly and shrunk from view under a mist.

The aeroplane was almost over their heads when they first saw it on the return. At first they could distinguish only one figure in the seats, but as it came nearer they saw that there were two.

"He's got him!" Carl shouted. "He's got Ben. I knew he would."

"Didn't I tell you," laughed Jimmie, throwing his arms around Carl's shoulders and giving him a good shake, "didn't I tell you that we would get off that island if it took a ship from the sky to do the trick?"

"Yes, but you didn't believe there was a flying machine within a thousand miles of us, when you said it," replied Carl. "It seems like a dream to me—Havens coming out of the clouds and picking us up."

It was our shouting that brought him down," Jimmie decided. "And here he comes, and Ben with him. This is our lucky day!"

"But we've lost the boat, and will have to pay for that," Carl said, the small troubles showing themselves as the big ones vanished, as is too often the case. "That will make a summer on the island

impossible," he continued, "for the boys can't get along without a motor boat, and they haven't money enough to buy another. What will they say to us?"

Jimmie did not answer, for his own mind was so full of the safe return of Ben that he could think of nothing else. He rushed forward to meet his chum as the latter stepped from the machine. Havens remained in his seat, cynically watching the affectionate meeting.

Presently the boys gathered around the machine, trying to find words in which to thank the man who had saved all their lives. Havens did not speak for a time, until, indeed, the lads had begun to fear that they had in some way offended him. Then he alighted from the machine and stood close in the fading light. The tide was coming in with a vengeance, and the thunder of the surf rendered conversation almost impossible.

A light rain had begun to fall, and a chill wind was blowing off the ocean. The landscape was darkening rapidly, and there was no light in sight. At some distance to the west there were a few buildings in a cluster, but they seemed to be deserted.

"I don't think I have made much of an improvement in the general situation," he said, presently, not noticing the words of thanks the lads had uttered. "Except for the tide, you boys are

in about as bad a predicament as you were out yonder. There is no place here where we can secure either warmth or food. There will be, later in the season, but now those houses you see are tenantless. It's a desolate spot now."

"Anyhow," Ben answered, "we're not drowning in the ocean. Have you got to stay here, too?" he continued. "Can't you fly off in your machine and find food and shelter? We can remain here until morning. You see, Mr. Havens, we knew you the minute you landed, and so understood from the start that your time was valuable."

"I'm not going off in the rain," Havens answered. "I can leave the *Sarah* here without risk, and we'll see what we can find on the island. There used to be an old caretaker here who never left the place. He may be here yet. If he is, we'll be welcome to supper, and to beds on the floor. His cottage is off to the right, the first one in that cluster."

Without more conversation the four started away on their hunt for supper and accommodations for the night. When they came to the cottage which Havens had pointed out they were delighted to see a window pane illumined by the light of a candle. The door was opened at Havens' knock, and a pleasant, old-fashioned face with twinkling blue eyes looked out on the three figures standing together in the rain.

"Can I take you in?" the old man asked, in a

high, cherry voice, in response to Havens' request for food and protection from the weather. "And why shouldn't I take you in? You know right well, Mr. Havens, that you and all your friends are welcome here. Come in! Come in! It is raining hard!"

The room in which the boys now found themselves was a large one, occupying the entire floor of the cottage. There was a great fireplace at one end, from which a welcome warmth proceeded, and there were bunks fastened to two of the walls with wooden pegs.

The floor was bare, showing every warped board and every stain which had come to it during long years of service. There was a long table in the center of the room, and around this, old-fashioned, rush-bottomed chairs were standing, pushed under to make more room in the large apartment. The old man drew chairs before the blazing fire of logs and brought a pot of steaming tea from the coals. Cups of tin were handed around, and the four were soon drinking what seemed to them to be the best tea they had ever tasted. Then the old man spoke.

"I see," he said, observing the boys' wondering glances at the bare floor and the bunks on the walls, "that you lads are wondering what kind of a hermit cave you have fallen upon! I don't wonder that you are curious, for it is rather an odd looking place.

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"You see," he continued, "during the course of the year, a good many people come up out of the sea and are received here. Some are young, and some are old, and some come with set faces, for the sea is cruel!"

"Do you mean dead?" asked Ben, with a little shiver, thinking of how they might have been brought to the beach by the tide and carried to the fire which would then have had no power to warm them. "Do you mean that people are found dead and brought in here at night?"

"At all hours of the day and night," was the reply. "At all hours."

"Only for Mr. Havens," Jimmie began, but the aviator stopped him with a motion of his hand and the talk turned to other channels, less personal.

While the storm raged outside and Captain Webb, the occupant of the cottage, prepared a great kettle of meat stew for supper, the boys told their rescuer of the newsboys' club in New York, of the desire for a summer's outing on the coast, of the saving of small sums by each member of the organization until enough had been secured to buy the motor boat and send the three lads on ahead to locate an island and open the camp.

Now the boat was gone, and so the whole scheme, so carefully planned, carried out with so much sacrifice, would have to be abandoned. The boys de-

clared that there were members of the club who would not believe that the boat had been bought and lost, and that quarrels were likely to result from the catastrophe on Sand Island, as they had named the scene of the wreck. Havens listened attentively, with a twinkle in his eyes when the insignificance of the sum already spent was mentioned.

"I'll tell you what to do, boys," he said, when Ben had concluded the telling of what was to him a very serious situation, "I need three youngsters about like you three, and can afford to pay fairly good wages, too. Now, if I advance you the sum you have expended for the club, so that you can leave the country with clean records and consciences, will you go to Mexico with me in flying machines?"

Would they? The boys actually arose and pranced about the smooth floor of the cottage. They shook hands with each other, and shook Havens' hand until Captain Webb threatened them all with loss of supper if they did not quiet down. Would they engage to go to Mexico with him in flying machines? Well!

"Very well, then," Havens said, after the boys had taken their seats again, "that is settled. I can't tell you all about the adventure now, but I wish you to understand that you will often be in peril, which, of course, I must share with you. Will that make any difference about going with you?"

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“What kind of peril?” asked Ben. “Only the danger of falling out?”

“There is always peril in high places,” Havens replied, “and we are going to the fabled ‘burning mountains’ of Mexico. And, besides——”

CHAPTER III.

AN ENEMY IN THE COTTAGE.

THERE came an interruption in the form of a sharp knock at the door, and hoarse voices sounded above the clamor of the rain. Captain Webb, as he was familiarly known, stepped forward to admit the visitors, but Havens stopped him with a whispered word and opened the door a trifle, admitting a gust of wet wind and the flickering light of a lantern, held high so that the face of the one at the opening on the inside might be seen.

The boys heard a few short, quick sentences spoken, then Havens shut the door and, calling Captain Webb aside, consulted with him in low and cautious tones. The lads wondered why the visitors had been left out in the rain, but said nothing. That they were still just beyond the door they knew very well, as they could hear the stamping of heavy shoes, as if the wearers were trying to warm their feet by exercise. Also the red light of the lantern reflected on the rain-dimmed window set in the cottage wall near the door.

After a short talk in a distant corner, Captain Webb and Havens drew on oilskins, including coats, leggings and wide-brimmed hats, and, thus appareled, approached the hearth where the boys sat. Havens looked very grave and Captain Webb seemed to be in a terrible hurry, for he pointed to the kettle of stew hanging on a hook over the blaze and said:

“You’ll find dishes and bread and coffee in the cupboard, lads. When the stew is done, help yourself. There are blankets piled up there in the corner, plenty of them. When you get tired go to bed. We may be away until daybreak, and, again, we may be back in an hour.”

The boys were too astonished to say very much, as they could not at all understand why they should be left behind if anything serious threatened the young man who had saved them from drowning. When the two men went out, Havens turned back for a moment and asked Ben to be sure the windows were fastened and the door locked and barred before they went to sleep. As the young man finished speaking Ben saw a weapon which flashed back the light from the door and the lantern in his hand.

After the men were gone Ben went to the window by the door and looked out through the one pane, but the rain coated the glass so that he could only see the figures and the light winding down a path to the place where the flying machine had been left.

The wind was rising and the rain was falling in great sheets. The leaping flames in the great fireplace looked pretty comfortable after the glance outside and the boy drew closer to the hearth.

The three city boys looked questioningly at each other for a moment, as Ben took his seat, and then all smiled broadly. It was not exactly a smile of mirth that came to their faces, but a smile of acceptance! The surroundings, the conditions, were all new and strange, and there seemed to be something of a mystery in the air, but they were ready to accept what came to them with complacency.

"Mr. Havens seems to be something of a live wire," Jimmie said, as he stirred the fire thoughtfully. "It would be interesting to know what took the two of them out into this storm. And why are they so close-mouthed about it? It may be something about the aeroplane!"

"Suppose," Ben suggested, "suppose Captain Webb and Mr. Havens are smugglers! Suppose there is a ship off the shore bringing them goods from over the Canadian line! Suppose there are officers—revenue men—after them! Suppose there are——"

"Suppose the President of the United States was Queen of the Cannibal Islands!" laughed Jimmie. "I guess we haven't got any think coming in this place. We're lucky to be here, anyway. Let it sizzle!"

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This last sentence was addressed to Carl, who had arisen to look into the kettle of stew. The lad took out a quantity of the fragrant mixture in a tin cup—burning his fingers in the act—and set it out by the door to cool. Then he covered the kettle again and sat down.

“I believe,” he said, rubbing his stomach, “that I could eat a shipload of smuggled goods this minute! I’m so hungry that a snowball would help some,” he continued. “The stew seems to be about done, too.”

In a moment Ben tested the sample at the door and brought back the empty cup with the advice that the dishes ought to be brought out. Then there was a great rattling of tin and pewter, and the kettle was swung off the fire. The stew filled the cottage with a rich, appetizing odor. “What would the boys down on Rivington street say to this?” Jimmie asked, as he filled a quart bowl to the brim with stew and put the cover back on the kettle. “I guess this is worth swimming in the sea for.”

“If the boys down on Rivington street,” Carl added, “could be out here with us, and hear the surf beating on the rocks, and hear the wind and rain, and sniff the salt in the air, and sit down by the side of this elegant stew, why, there wouldn’t never be any more boys on Rivington street, or Grand, or Stanton, or any of the streets where boys are three to the square yard.”

"It is just like a scene in a play," Ben commented.

"That's right!" Carl exclaimed. "There's the breaking waves, the incoming tide, the lonely cottage on the cliff, and the wild storm. And, come to think of it, there's the mysterious knock at the door and the sudden disappearance in the rain, with the wind howling in as the door is opened. I'm going to put this in a play some day!"

"I wonder why Mr. Havens didn't tell us more about that trip to the 'burning mountains' of Mexico?" Ben said. "And I wonder where the 'burning mountains' of Mexico are? Who knows?"

"He didn't tell us about the journey," practical Jimmie answered, "because he was interrupted by the knock on the door. That's what I want to know about most of all—what they have gone out in all this smother of rain for. Must be something secret and important."

"I can tell you where the 'burning mountains' of Mexico are," Carl, who was inclined to be studious—when there were no active interests at hand!—replied to Ben's question, after Jimmie had ceased speaking of the mysterious men who had come to the door in the rain, "they are in the Sierra Madre range of mountains, in the State of Jalisco, which is one of the Pacific divisions of old Mexico. They are from 12,000 to 14,000 feet high. All that country is far above sea level, for it is the southern end of the Mexican tablelands."

"Why 'burning mountains?'" asked Jimmie, dishing out another bowl of the stew and helping himself to a great slice of bread and butter.

"Because," replied Carl, "there are volcanoes there, one of them, Colima, over 12,000 feet high. 'Burning mountain' is the name given to this volcano by the natives, and there are many other peaks in that section which show fire at night and clouds of smoke by day."

"What's Mr. Havens going down there for?" demanded Jimmie. "I wonder if there isn't something lawless about all this? Perhaps he'll mix us up in some quarrel with the government before he gets through with us."

"He may be going after gold," suggested Ben. "Any gold there?" he asked of Carl, who was now busy with his second bowl of stew.

"There are stories about gold having been discovered there," was the reply, "but the gold mines of Mexico are farther to the north, principally in the State of Sonora. There are immense iron mines near the 'burning mountains,' in Jalisco, and there are silver mines in Zacatecas which have been worked for three hundred years, and which are entered by broad stairways of stone. It is a wild country about the mountains where Mr. Havens says he is going to take us."

"I'd like to know where you got all this information about Mexico," Jimmie broke in, as Carl

was about to proceed with a description of the silver mines of Mexico. "You're a perfect encyclopedia!"

"When the revolution broke out down there," Carl replied, with a grin, "a lot of us boys got the notion into our heads that we ought not to miss all the adventure guaranteed by the struggle, so we organized a band to go down there and clean out the Diaz government. We never went of course—at least no one but Glenn Richards went—so all I got out of the scheme was the information I picked out of the teacher and the books at night school. Now that information will come into good use!"

"You say Glenn Richards went?" asked Ben. "I wondered why the boy had disappeared! He's a reckless sort of chap. Did he go alone?"

"All alone," was the reply. "He never wrote back, either."

"Perhaps we'll meet him down there?" suggested Jimmie.

"And Glenn on the ground, in some city, and our party up in the air, over the wildest country in Mexico?" laughed Carl. "I guess not!"

"There's no knowing what we'll find down there," Ben observed. "If we had anticipated finding a flying machine adventure up here," he continued, "we would have been roasted good by the New York boys."

"We can't all go to Mexico in that one aeroplane!" Jimmie suggested.

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"Huh!" Carl answered. "I guess you've never read much about Mr. Havens' travels in the air! He has a dozen flying machines, and has some of them fitted up to live in! Well," he smiled, as the others began laughing at him, "he has some of them fitted up so the planes can be folded into shelters on the ground, and so the driver can travel hundreds of miles without dropping down for food or gasoline."

"I have read something about his aeroplane inventions," Ben admitted. "I presume, of course, that he knows what he is doing when he hires us to go along with him. I wonder why he doesn't come back? What are those fellows doing off there in the rain?"

"It is a stormy night," Jimmie declared, opening the door a crack, "a great deal worse than we knew about, sitting here by the fire, and I should think they'd want to come in and get warm. Here comes one, now, slanting through the rain and half blown away every other minute."

He swung open the door as he spoke and a muffled figure stepped inside the cottage, struggled a second with the wind on the broad door, and then turned the key in the lock and put up an iron bar, which fitted into circular rings fastened to the casings. This done, he threw off his wrappings and faced the fire and the wondering boys. The face and figure they saw were those of a man they had never met before!

"Good evening!" Ben said, courteously, although his voice shook a little at the thought that a stranger had been admitted to the cottage after the warning to fasten the windows and the door.

The stranger made no reply, but stood staring about the place with sharp black eyes, as if seeking other inmates. It was not a kindly face the boys saw. The cheek-bones were high, the forehead narrow and low, the eyebrows heavy and sinister, the eye orbits too close together, the lips thin and cruel, with cynical curves at the corners, the nose high between the eyes and very broad at the nostrils. An unpleasant and threatening face, indeed, the lads thought, as the man stood by the fire looking insolently about the place, lighted only by the blaze now.

"Where did you come from?" the intruder asked, finally, taking in all three faces with a hostile glance. "How comes it that you are here?"

"We came in with a friend to escape the storm," Ben replied.

"What friend?" snarled the other. "Where is he now?"

"He's gone out with Captain Webb," Ben answered, hesitatingly, not knowing exactly how much he ought to tell this man of their movements or intentions. "He went out not long ago, and is coming back soon," he added, desiring to give the impression that they were not alone, as the Captain and Mr. Havens might return at any moment.

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“I don’t think he’ll be back right away,” snarled the stranger. “I have known Webb to be gone all night. Besides, there’s no such luck for me! I’m waiting for that friend you speak of! There will be others here to wait, too, and if you boys open your heads when you hear him coming, that will be your last effort in this world! Understand?”

CHAPTER IV.

JIMMIE GIVES A MUD BATH.

THE boys would have been very thick-headed indeed if they had not understood the threatening words and the vicious glances. They gathered in a little group at one end of the hearth and remained silent.

As for the intruder, he went sloshing about the room in a pair of broken rubber boots which left a wet spot the size of the sole wherever he stepped. Rain was dripping from the long waterproof coat he wore, too, but he seemed to be ignorant of the fact.

After he had looked into every corner of the cottage, climbed up a ladder which stood against a wall to peer into the garret, opened the cupboard door to look between the shelves, piled the blankets out in the middle of the floor to make sure that no one was hiding under them, he filled a quart bowl with stew and sat down by the fire to devour it, at no time paying any attention to the boys.

There was something panther-like about the

movements of the man, something malicious in his handling of everything he touched. He grasped the great spoon he held as if he anticipated an attempt to take it from him, and he bent his back and neck and nosed so close to the top of the bowl as he ate greedily that the journeys of the spoon were very short indeed. He devoured the food with a relish, stopping now and again to smack his thin lips and replenish his bowl.

When he had quite finished, he went to the window beside the door and looked out into the darkness. There was a menacing look on his face as he stood there, apparently unconscious of the presence of any one else in the apartment. Finally he took a match from a dry pocket under his oilskin coat, struck it on a panel of the door, and flashed the flame three times before the window. This done, he sat down by the fire and gazed steadily at the embers, so steadily that Ben peered forward as if to learn what he saw there. But the boy saw nothing at all.

The boys had remained perfectly quiet up to the time the signal had been given from the window. Then the knowledge that the accomplices of this intruder were to take possession of the cottage, were to wait there for the return of Captain Webb and Mr. Havens, wait with hostile intentions, stirred them to action.

But at the slightest movement or whisper from

them the stranger before the fire turned his fierce eyes in their direction, and ordered them to remain quiet, as became boys of their age. The lads did remain quiet, but it was not because they were frightened into submission to the fellow. They were trying to reach some mutual understanding as to what they ought to do under the circumstances.

Then a happy thought came to Jimmie. It had been one of the fads at the newsboys' clubroom in New York to talk together in the deaf and dumb language, and so all three were proficient in it. Jimmie snapped his fingers quietly to attract the attention of the others and began talking with his fingers while the man at the fire continued to look down into the embers. This is what the boys said to each other:

Jimmie—"Let's throw him out! I could almost do it alone."

Carl—"I'll go in on that. Shall I start it?"

Ben—"Don't be in a hurry. We ought to find out who's coming to join him here. We ought to find out what their intentions are."

Jimmie—"You heard what he said! He means harm to Mr. Havens. If we wait for others to come, it won't be so easy."

Ben—"All right, then, I'll start something! Pitch him headfirst out into the wet and bar the door! That's it, eh?"

"I'd like to know what you boys are up to,"

snapped the stranger, looking up from the fire. "I never knew three runts like you to keep so still before. Come over here and tell me about yourselves."

Jimmie (finger talk again)—"When the door is opened, I'll duck out and notify Captain Webb and Mr. Havens what is going on here."

"Are you coming?" thundered the man, feeling under the skirts of his long raincoat, as if for a weapon. "What are you making your fingers go like that for?" as Ben signaled back to Jimmie:

Ben (finger talk)—"Let me go! You remain here. Get him to the door and I'll give him a bunt and send him out into the rain. Then I'll follow him out and slide off into the darkness to warn Captain Webb and Mr. Havens."

"What were you saying to him?" demanded the stranger, making a grab at Ben's collar. "Come and tell me what's going on here!"

Ben dodged away and stood at the other side of the table.

"He was telling me that there were voices at the door," Jimmie, with a forgivable disregard of the truth, said. "I've been hearing some one whispering there for a long time. Shall I go and open it?"

"I'll attend to that myself!" snarled the other, rising to go to the door. The knocks Ben was giving the under side of the table really did seem to

be outside the door! Ben signaled to Jimmie to keep back, but Jimmie was determined to carry out his original programme and warn the men in person, so he followed close to the heels of the intruder as he took down the bar, turned the key, and stuck his head out into the night.

Carl was behind Jimmie, too, and no sooner was the man's head out of the door than he brought the door wide open with a jerk which came near bringing the fellow back upon himself.

"What does this——"

The intruder got no farther, for just then Jimmie's head struck him like a bullet in the small of the back and sent him spinning out doors, where he fell in a puddle of water and remained quite still for a moment. Jimmie was out almost as soon as the fallen man, out and dodging off into the darkness.

The lad stood there until the door was closed, locked and barred, then he started away. However, the man who had been hustled out of the cottage so swiftly still lay in the puddle, and the boy thought it wouldn't come amiss to find out why he did not get up, so he moved toward him and waited a short time. Then the fellow moved, sat up in the water with a string of profane language on his lips, and glared about. There was only the light from the window to show the pool in which he sat and the falling drops, so he essayed to rise to his feet.

But Jimmie, remembering the man's threats and insolence, conceived the idea of paying him back for his impudence, so he came up from behind and pulled him back into the pool by the hair of his head—pulled him back and saw that his head and face went into the muddy water more than once! Then he darted away in the direction of the path Captain Webb and Mr. Havens had taken earlier in the evening.

He had not proceeded more than a dozen rods when he heard voices in the path directly ahead. He drew to one side and listened, though the noise of the surf and the dripping of the rain upon the rocks almost drowned the sounds he was listening for.

The speakers came on in the darkness. Captain Webb and Mr. Havens, the boy knew, had carried a lantern. These people, advancing cautiously through the darkness, he thought could be there for no good. His impression was that they were the men the intruder had been expecting at the cottage.

The boy chuckled to himself when he thought of the plight the fellow's friends would find him in, soaked with muddy water, locked out of the cottage, and in a furious yet useless temper! He had no doubt that Ben and Carl would be able to hold the cottage against the fellows until Captain Webb and Mr. Havens could be found and informed of what

was going on there. In a moment the men passed him without his having been able to distinguish a word of their conversation.

It was pitch dark, and the way was rough and unfamiliar, so the boy proceeded slowly in the direction of the golf links where the aeroplane had been left. His notion was that it was the safety of the airship that had taken the two men out into the storm, and that they would be found somewhere near the machine, but when he came to a point from which the links would have been observable by daylight, he was disappointed at not seeing a glimmer of light from the lantern they had carried.

Feeling his way cautiously, so as to avoid colliding with a rock, or falling into a depression, the boy finally came to level ground which he believed to be the links. The ocean was not far away now, and the pounding of the surf was almost deafening.

It would be useless to wait there for voices to direct him, so he went on toward the sea, drenched with spray as he drew nearer to the swirling waters. Still there was no sign of the lantern.

After a time he stumbled over something and fell down. As he tried to regain his feet his hands came in contact with wet canvas, and he knew that he had come to the flying machine. A short investigation, however, informed him that it was only the wreck of the machine which he had come upon. The frame had been pulled apart, and the motors

lay detached in a pool of water. Captain Webb and Mr. Havens had arrived too late to protect the aeroplane, or they had not taken that direction at all.

At any rate, the *Sarah*, as Mr. Havens had called his machine, had been destroyed. Whether or not this would affect the proposed journey through the air to the 'burning mountains' of Mexico, the boy did not know, but the fact that the machine had been ruthlessly destroyed filled him with anger.

He had every reason to believe that Captain Webb and his friend had not been attacked, for their enemy, the intruder, had stated that he was at the cottage to await their return. This was some consolation to the lad as he turned toward the habitation again, wondering if Ben and Carl had been able to keep the hostile visitors out of the shelter.

Half way up the dark path he felt himself seized by the arm and drawn aside. He struggled desperately for a moment, and then a hoarse voice shouted in his ear :

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The clamor of the surf was so insistent, the sweep of the wind so violent, that the man who had taken Jimmie by the arm had been obliged to place his face close to the boy's in order to make his questions heard. Jimmie felt a heavy beard brushing against his cheek as the man spoke.

"I came down to look after the machine," Jimmie answered, speaking at the top of his voice and trying to draw away from the rough clutch on his arm. "Do you know where it is?" he went on, hoping to keep from the other, whoever he might be, the knowledge that he had discovered that the aeroplane had been wrecked.

The captor did not reply instantly. The two stood there in the wind and rain, close together, yet neither able to see more of each other than a vague outline. The boy could feel the fingers of the other working nervously on his arm. He tried to jerk away, but did not succeed.

"You're one of the boys who went to the cottage?" demanded the voice, then. "Well, come along with me! We'll see about this!"

Jimmie was strong for his age, and well trained in boxing and wrestling, but he found it impossible, struggle as he might, to break away from the steel-like grasp on his arm. The man who held him seemed to be a giant in strength. The boy's efforts were greeted with chuckles, only faintly heard through the war of the elements.

Half walking, half pushed along ahead of his muscular captor, Jimmie finally came to a building which bulked large in the faint light. There were no lights anywhere, but the man who had brought him there seemed to have no difficulty in fitting a key to a lock and opening a door.

Evidently familiar with the interior, the man then passed through several rooms, by the sense of touch, until he came to a stairway, down which the boy was hustled. The musty air proclaimed the dis-used cellar.

"You'll have company soon," the harsh voice said, as a key turned above.

CHAPTER V.

LIKE A FLY ON A WALL.

"WE'VE got mixed up with something with action to it, anyway," Carl exclaimed as Ben locked and bolted the cottage door, after the sensational departure of the hostile visitor and their chum. "I wish, though, that Jimmie had remained here with us. He may be in danger."

A series of hard blows now came on the door, shaking the frame and the window close by. These were followed by angry shouts.

"If he is in danger," Ben commented, drawing the table toward the threatened door, "he hasn't got anything on us. That fellow he bunted out means to get in again. I wish we had the automatics we lost when the bottom dropped out of the motor boat. We'd show him!"

The demands for admittance and the blows continuing, the boys pushed the heavy table against the door and piled chairs on it. In a short time they heard other voices speaking shrilly in the storm.

"The fellows referred to by the man who got in here have arrived," Carl said, "and, unless Cap-

tain Webb and Mr. Havens come, it is only a question of time when that door will give in. I'd just like to know what this is all about, anyhow. They seem to be after Mr. Havens, from what the person Jimmie bunted out of doors said, but I'd like to know what for. Perhaps he's going to the 'burning mountains' of Mexico because it is getting too hot for him here."

"I don't believe he is running away," Ben stoutly defended. "He's a crack aviator, and known to be a millionaire. He can remain here and fight, in the courts or elsewhere, as long as the best of them, so why should he fly away to escape danger? He doesn't look to me like that kind of a man."

"It is strange, what's going on here," the boy continued, "but we'll have to wait for the solution. Say, but that door is going to drop in, in about a minute more, and then they'll probably beat us up because of the way we treated the person who landed in the mud puddle," the boy added, as a sound like the beating of rocks against the panels came to his ears. "We'd better be looking for a way out of this."

The thick oaken panels were firm and staunch, but the attacks upon them were slowly tearing them from the frame of the door. Directly a stone came hurtling through the pane of the window, and then a fierce and threatening face looked through the opening.

"Unless you want your feet roasted at that fire," the man at the window snarled, "you'd better let us in. If we have to break the door down, you'll wish you had never left that island out in the Atlantic, but had died an easy death in the tide. Come! Are you going to open up?"

For answer Ben seized a great earthen bowl from the table and hurled it with unerring aim at the vicious face framed in by the window sash. The boy was something more than an amateur baseball pitcher, having played many games with professionals, and so the novel weapon went swiftly and exactly to its mark. The boys saw the fellow outside drop, but not before a gush of blood came from a jagged cut inflicted on the forehead by the broken edge of the bowl.

There was a moment's cessation of the attack, and the boys knew that the men outside were gathered about the wounded man. Then, with oaths and threats of future vengeance, the blows came harder and faster than ever. The lads looked at each other in dismay.

"I guess I have done it now," Ben said, dodging a stone which came through the broken sash. "I wonder if there isn't some way out of here that we can use? There ought to be more than one entrance, seems to me."

"There's a trap door in the corner by the closet," Carl announced. "That may lead to a cellar, and

there may be an outside door to the cellar. There usually is to these New England cottages."

"But they'll see us going down," urged Ben, "and guard the outer door—if there is one. What about that?"

For answer Carl seized a pail of spring water which Captain Webb had brought in for cooking purposes and doused it on the fire, now burned down to a bed of coals. The effect was disconcerting as well as instantaneous. Before the boys could drop the now empty pail the room was full of blinding smoke and steam and half extinguished embers. Save where a coal burned dimly on the floor there was no light in the room, only an eye-smarting, breath-choking mixture of steam and smoke.

"Make for the trap door," Ben whispered. "Drop down and look for an opening to the air. I reckon this shack will burn, if they don't get in and extinguish the little blazes starting on the floor!"

Carl lifted the trap and dropped to the concrete floor below. There was no stairway, but a ladder standing near by indicated the usual manner of entering and leaving the place. Ben was by his side in an instant.

"Here!" the latter whispered, taking out a box of matches which he had found on the mantel, "you take some of these and go round to the left and I'll go the other way. There must be an opening leading to the outside. "Ah!"

Carl turned quickly at the exclamation and saw Ben undoing the inner fastenings of a door which led through the foundation of the cottage on seaward side. It was of heavy construction, being made of two-inch plank, and could not have been forced in hours except with tools adapted to the purpose.

"The builder of the cottage evidently expected to have to withstand sieges," Ben cried, as the bar dropped to the cellar floor and he drew the door open. "Well, even these doors won't stand fire!"

A gust of wind and rain, straight off the tumbling ocean, blowing in through the open doorway told the boys that they were at an avenue of escape from the cottage. The sounds coming from above told them that they had not found the means of exit a second too soon. Already there were heavy feet on the cottage floor, already there were voices at the open hatch through which they had dropped!

"This looks pretty good to me," Ben cried, as he passed out of the old-fashioned "cellar-way" and turned to await the approach of his chum.

"It is almost too good to be true," said Carl, coming up the half dozen steps to the surface of the yard in the rear of the cottage. "It is a wonder they wasn't watching this place."

The boys saw that the cottage was now really on fire on the inside. Long fingers of flame were creeping up the walls, which were hung with dry

clothing on two sides and occupied with the sleeping bunks on the other two. The blaze was making great headway in the cotton bedding in the bunks, and it seemed only a question of time when the whole structure would be enveloped in flames. The noise of assault at the front had now ceased, and, fearing that the outlaws would soon surround the burning building to prevent their escape, the boys drew aside into a dark depression and waited and listened.

"I am getting the notion that the rascals don't like the publicity given the incidents of the night by the fire," Ben observed, after a long wait. "The chances are that they have taken to their heels long before this."

"I reckon that's right," Carl answered, shivering in the wind and rain. "I hope they'll freeze to death, hiding somewhere, as we are likely to. Why can't we get into one of these deserted houses? I'm so cold that I could appear on the stage as a cake of ice in Uncle Tom's Cabin."

There being no indications of the presence of the men who had attacked the cottage, the boys finally decided to leave their hiding-place and seek warmth and protection from the rain in one of the houses which loomed up in the darkness not far away. The light from the conflagration was now so pronounced that they would have no difficulty in finding their way to one of the structures standing

almost on the edge of the tableland which lifted thirty or forty feet above the level of the wave-washed beach.

Keeping in the shadows as much as possible, they presently came to the rear of a building which stood so close to the drop in the plateau that only a narrow path intervened between the walls and the seaward side of the precipice. The path was, of course, in darkness, for the fire shone on the front of the house and not on the back, but the lads managed to keep their footing, though the wind from off the ocean screamed and tore at them fiercely, as they looked about—or felt about, rather—for some means of entrance.

“We’re likely to break our necks here!” Ben declared, as, with numb fingers, he felt along the wall for some opening. “I wish we had tried the front entrance. I don’t believe those toughs are anywhere near here now.”

“There’s a lot of shouting,” Carl announced, after listening for a moment. “There must be a lot of people from the mainland around the cottage.”

“A fire always draws a crowd,” Ben answered, shivering in the rain.

“Suppose we go back there and wait for Jimmie and the others?” Carl suggested. “The fire will bring them out of their holes, wherever they are, I take it, and we’ll never be noticed at all.”

"Don't you ever think it!" advised Ben. "We are strangers here, and if we show ourselves there is sure to be a country constable with billy-goat whiskers ready to lock us up as suspects. I don't like the idea of spending the rest of the night in a country jail."

"But if Captain Webb and Mr. Havens are there," began the other, but Ben drew at his sleeve and whispered to him to keep quiet for a moment and listen. Then he heard the sound of blows— heavy blows beating against a surface which gave back a hollow sound. The noise was below them.

"Some one is doing a good job of pounding down there!" Carl said, as crash after crash came to their ears. "Sounds like a battering ram at work on a stout door! There she goes, too!"

This last exclamation as a great crash reached their ears, the noise coming, apparently, from the ground beneath their feet. The crash was followed by a rattling sound, as if a door or some other article made of wood was tumbling, end over end, over the cliff.

The boys bent and looked down, their eyes following the line of descent to the beach below. The light from the burning cottage, now reflected on the low hanging sky, enabled them to see a moving figure on the dangerous incline, clinging desperately to such projections as showed under the red light.

"That's Jimmie!" Ben cried, excitedly grasping

Carl by the shoulder. "How did he get in there? Catch hold of my heels, and I'll drop down and haul the little rascal up. He never can make it alone. What do you think of his being here? Hurry, now, or he'll take a tumble to the rocks!"

"How do you know it is Jimmie?" questioned Carl, reluctantly catching hold of Ben's ankles as the boy extended himself along the lip of the precipice and prepared to swing his head and shoulders over.

"How do I know?" grunted Ben, reaching about for a smooth place to trust himself to, "I saw his red head in the red light a minute ago! That's how I know."

But Carl, more cautious, was not yet convinced, so he called out:

"Hello! Hello, Jimmie! What are you up to?"

Only a faint gasp was borne to the ears of the boys by the wind.

"He's about all in!" Ben decided. "Now, you hold tight! You'll have a job drawing us both up! Are you fit?"

"Fit as a fiddle!" was the reply, and Ben dropped over the edge of the precipice, calling out as he swung in the air, only his feet, in the desperate clutch of his chum, above the lip of the vertical wall.

"Can you reach my hands, Jimmie?" he grunted, as the wind blew his body back against the rock.

Jimmie could not reach his hands! A moment before he might have done so, but he was slipping down! The framework of the door opening out on the seashore, upon which he had managed to climb, was sagging under his weight. The boy's white face looked up piteously into that of his chum. He was too scant of breath to talk.

Ben had only a second to think in. The boy was dropping, before his eyes, to certain death on the jagged rocks which lay at the foot of the precipice. Jimmie tried to smile as he looked up, the red light of the conflagration on his wan face, but it was a weak imitation of his usually cheery laugh that Ben saw.

The thunder of the surf, the howling of the wind, the downpour of the rain were all in the ears of the two boys as they looked into each other's eyes, their hands not half a foot apart, yet as far distant from each other as the ends of the earth so far as any hope of succor was concerned. Jimmie continued to slip down as his footing sagged under his weight.

Calling to Carl to hold tight, Ben threw out a hand and caught the wet skirt of his coat, which had been unbuttoning and working down until now it hung nearly over his head. Ben had always had trouble with his buttons, and now he blessed their tendency to creep out of their fastenings! A few desperate wrenches, a ripping at the armholes, and the coat was at last in his hands, though it seemed

to the boy that he never would get the pain of the removal of it out of his shoulders! Taking the garment by the skirt, he dropped the sleeves down to Jimmie, into whose eyes there came a glimmer of hope.

"Now listen, kid," Ben said, his voice hoarse, his head buzzing with the blood running into it, "Carl can never draw us both up to the top, for he has only a narrow ledge to stand on. Put your hands into the armholes of the coat and hang on, just enough to keep from slipping farther down. Understand?"

Jimmie looked up, but could not speak, so great was the strain of his dangerous position. Ben smiled encouragingly and continued:

"Put just enough weight on the coat to keep from tumbling back! I'll hold it so that little weight will come on me, and Carl will pull me up. When I get my legs up on the ledge we can both draw you up. Understand?"

Jimmie nodded, lifted one hand at a time from its support, and shot it into the coat at an armhole!

CHAPTER VI.

AN "IRISH BATTERY" IN ACTION.

THE strong wind helped the boys in the desperate struggle which followed, for it was blowing straight off the sea, and at times seemed to hold Jimmie like a fly to the wall! It was hard work for Carl to get Ben back on the ledge, with the added weight Jimmie was putting on the coat, but at last he succeeded, and then the lad was drawn out of his perilous position.

As his feet finally left the casing of the door upon which he had managed to climb, the great frame, constructed of heavy plank, parted from its hold on the rocks and went to the bottom with a crash. In breaking the door down Jimmie had loosened it from the iron clasps which had held it in place. The rescue had come not a minute too soon!

All three boys lay for what seemed to them a long time on the ledge, the rain beating into their faces, the light of the burning cottage momentarily growing stronger, before any one spoke. They were completely exhausted—too tired to utter a word!

"Why didn't you go and get a rope?" Jimmie finally asked. "You've about killed yourselves helping me, when there were plenty of people who would have assisted you within reaching distance! Hear them yelling around that fire?" he went on. "Did you set the cottage on fire?"

A few words told of the events of the night, on both sides, and then the lads continued their search for an entrance into the house. Jimmie fully agreed with Ben that they ought not, under the circumstances, to show themselves at the fire, at least not until Captain Webb and Mr. Havens had been consulted.

To be honest about it, both Ben and Carl were fearful of being questioned about the origin of the fire which was destroying the cottage. Although they had not intended doing so, they had in reality started the conflagration, and they knew that they would not shirk the responsibility for the calamity if closely examined. As Ben had said to Carl, there was probably a country constable with billy-goat whiskers waiting about to increase his importance by making an arrest.

"When you think of the mess we might have gotten into if we had gone after assistance," Ben said to Jimmie, "you ought to be glad we did nothing of the kind. Besides, you would have fallen before we could have brought people here to help, or secured a rope."

"Perhaps so," Jimmie answered. "Anyway, we all warmed our blood a little! Now, where are we going to spend the night? It doesn't seem right to me, after all, to venture into this house. I got into it once to-night, and I don't feel no longings to enter it again right away!"

"This may be the headquarters of the men who smashed the aeroplane," Ben admitted, "so, perhaps, we'd better look for another shelter. I wonder if they thought they could keep you in that cellar?" he laughed. "What did the fellow look like?"

"Had a voice like a buzz-saw and a big crop of whiskers," was the reply. "That's all I know about his looks. He near broke my neck throwing me down the cellar stairs. What do you think he meant by saying that I would soon have company?" he asked.

"He meant to get Ben and I," answered Carl. "That's easy! Or, maybe, he thought of capturing Captain Webb and Mr. Havens!"

"Say!" Jimmie broke in. "How do we know they didn't capture the two of them? How do we know that Captain Webb and Mr. Havens are not guests in this same old house? I'm going to find out, anyway!"

Around on the north side of the structure the boys came to a window within their reach, the ground sloping up toward the front. The sash was locked, but Ben broke a pane of glass and boosted Jimmie

up. In a moment the sash was lifted, with the boy inside. He looked out and laughed.

"You'd better let me return the favor you did me," he said, "and pull you up! There are people talking in here somewhere."

"The first thing you know," commented Carl, "you'll get shunted into that cellar again! The people in there may be the ones who served you that trick before! You want to be still as a mouse, whatever you do."

"Mouse is no name for it," Jimmie whispered back, his words just heard in the drift of the wind. "Come on in! The prospects are fine!"

After some delay Ben and Carl were lifted through the window. Then began a soft-footed investigation of the house. There was nothing remarkable about the first rooms they came to, all being empty of furnishings of any description. Then they came to a hall, with doors opening on both sides. From under one of these came a shaving of yellow light.

"Shall we go in?" asked Jimmie, in a low tone.

"That's what we came in here for, to find out what kind of people live here—people who bump fellows down cellar stairs. Go on."

"Wait!" Ben broke in. "If we open the door that will end our tour of inspection. If we find another room which opens into this one we may be able to get a look in from another door. Let's try this one."

The door he tried opened noiselessly at his turning of the knob, and the three filed silently into a dark apartment. There was a connecting door between this room and the one where the talking was in progress, and a streak of light lay under it. All bent forward and listened.

"We have exhausted every argument," they heard a man saying, "and now we come to force. You must give over the expedition you plan and surrender the papers we have asked for, or you will not be allowed to leave this room. This is final, so think it over."

The voice was well modulated, evidently that of a refined man. The tone was low, calm, and matter of fact. Not at all such a tone as one would connect with the threatening words which had been spoken.

"And so you come now to threats!"

This voice, too, was low and musical. The dominant note of it was conciliatory rather than otherwise. The listeners nudged each other in the ribs, for it was the voice of Mr. Havens. In a moment it went on.

"How, may I ask, are you to prevent my leaving this room?"

"We have the means of doing so," was the level-voiced reply.

"I see!" Havens continued. "And you brought me here by means of a lying letter to tell me this? You might at least have made the proposition to me in New York and spared me a long journey."

"In New York," the other answered, "we had no means of enforcing our just demands. We have looked out for that here, and are prepared to do so—even if you never leave the island."

"Meaning murder, I presume?" asked Havens, in a low tone.

"Call it what you will," was the only answer.

"I notice," Havens continued, speaking as quietly as if engaged in the most unimportant of conversations, "that you have seen fit to burn Captain Webb's cottage. I infer that you are willing to pay for it?"

"Your boys, the ones you picked up out of the tide, did that."

"I see!" Havens went on. "And where are these boys now?"

"Two of them were burned to death in the cellar of the cottage, and one is held, awaiting your decision, in the basement of this house."

The listeners chuckled, and Carl muttered that they ought to have weapons of some sort with them, as the intention seemed to be to murder the man who had saved their lives. Ben moved toward the hall.

"Where are you going?" asked Jimmie. "Better remain here, for there'll be doings directly. Oh, doings you'll want to see," he added, with a chuckle which Carl hastened to check by placing a hand over the lad's face.

"I'm going out after an Irish battery!" Ben answered as he opened the door and passed out.

"What's an Irish battery?" asked Carl, in amazement.

"Huh! Don't you know that?" demanded the other. "You wait until Ben comes back, and then you'll see!"

The voices in the lighted room grew more threatening as the boys waited for Ben's return. There was also a moving about of chairs, as if the room was being prepared for a hand-to-hand encounter. At times four voices were heard speaking at once, so the boys knew that Havens, unless Captain Webb was there, was faced by three enemies.

Presently Ben returned, and, as he came close to his chums, they knew that his pockets were bulging with something hard, something which rattled like cobblestones! They made a place for him at the door.

"Don't let them get together!" Jimmie urged. "If they do, you'll be in danger of injuring Mr. Havens. You'll have to hurry!"

The first sound that came from beyond the door, after that, was the ominous click of a revolver. Then came the threat:

"You have two minutes in which to think it over!"

With his right hand drawn back, Ben opened the door. Havens sat in an easy chair, white of face but outwardly calm. Across the table from him stood three men, each with a revolver in his hand.

The men who threatened Havens turned at the creaking of the hinges and faced the boy, the muzzles of their guns turning with them. For only a second they looked as if they had seen a ghost. Even in that exciting time the boys realized that the men had stated what they believed to be the truth when they had informed Havens that two of the lads had perished in the burning cottage.

Havens looked into the doorway where Ben stood with a smile growing on his white face. He made no effort to rise, only leaned back in his easy chair and waited.

There was no delay for parley. The men leveled their weapons defiantly at the doorway, then Ben's hand swung forward, like the lever of a finely-organized machine. The first man dropped, his face showing surprise as he went down. The others fired, but with uncertain and resultless aim. Ben's left hand fed his right with his peculiar kind of ammunition, and the men fell in a heap on the floor. The boy's aim had been exact, and the stones he had hurled, with the speed and accuracy of a pitched ball, had done their work almost as effectually as so many bullets could have done.

Havens arose leisurely—somehow his every movement seemed leisurely!—to his feet and stooped over the prostrate men. They were unconscious, and great wounds on their heads told where the stones had struck. The aviator smiled as he lifted one of the missiles from the floor and examined it.

"You ought to belong to one of the top-notch ball leagues!" he said, turning to Ben. "I have never seen anything exactly like that done before."

"He's some pitcher!" Jimmie exclaimed. "He can make a ball drop a foot at the end of a bat. Just wait until you see him play!"

"I'll take your word for it," laughed Havens. "These fellows are probably due for a long sleep, and for sore heads when they wake," he added, "so we may as well be going. I'm getting anxious for a sight of the burning mountains of Mexico."

"But the flying machine is smashed!" cried Jimmie.

"Yes, I know," was the reply, "but I have at least two or three more at my hangar on Long Island. How much did you boys hear of what was said before you opened the door?"

"Enough to know what they were threatening to do," replied Ben.

"I see," observed Havens. "Well, the fact is that these gentlemen have never taken kindly to my proposed visit to the burning mountains we are planning to visit. They brought me here by means of a forged letter, expecting to bring me to their terms, which include a surrender of all my rights and prospects in Mexico. I'll tell you more about it, and also express my thanks, at another time.

After mutual explanations they hastened to the burning cottage, now past all saving, where they

found Captain Webb, surrounded by a large number of people from the mainland.

"You'll have to give it all up now, I take it?" said the Captain.

"Why," Havens replied, "we'll be in the air, going south, in two days."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST NIGHT OUT.

DURING the ride in the rowboat to the mainland, that night, and during the wait at a half-opened hotel, Ben Whitcomb pondered over the strange events of the night without finding any satisfactory explanation of them.

Later, while Havens was, in his calm and leisurely way, talking the officers out of the notion of arresting the three men who had threatened his life, and while he was insisting, still as if dealing only in unimportant trifles, on Captain Webb taking from him full pay for the burned cottage and its contents, and while he was arranging for Pullman sections to New York, the boy studied over the words Havens had uttered after his rescue—his only explanation of the strange condition of affairs.

“These gentlemen,” he had said, “have never taken kindly to my proposed visit to the burning mountains of Mexico.”

Ben’s mind was in a whirl. The unexpected and sensational rescue from Sand Island, the wrecking

of the aeroplane, the desperate attempt to force Havens into a compliance with the demands of his enemies, the providential rescue of Jimmie from the cliff, the firing of the cottage, all seemed to stand out in his brain as separate and distinct events with no connection whatever between them.

And yet, after a time, he saw a thread of destiny connecting each event with all the others. Only for the rescue from Sand Island, Havens might have been murdered in the deserted house. Only for the accidental firing of the cottage, Jimmie would not have been rescued from the cliff. Fate had carried them all over a dangerous route, but had brought them to safety at last! So considering the doings of the night, the boy fell asleep, lulled by the steady motion of the Pullman, and when he awoke it was broad daylight and the sun was shining.

"All out for New York! Grand Central station!" he heard some one saying, and then the laughing face of Jimmie peered down at him from the upper berth. In a few minutes both boys were out and dressed. They looked ruefully at their torn and muddy garments as they drew them on, but they made the best of them and were soon on their way to the lavatory, where they found Carl Nichols, already prepared to leave the car. He smiled as they entered.

"Do you know what time it is?" he asked, as they entered.

"Late," answered Ben, "for we seem to have the car to ourselves."

"After nine," Carl informed them, then. "We have been in the station for two hours. Mr. Havens woke me up when he left, two hours ago, and told me to remain here until he returned. He's a queer one, eh?"

"I should say so!" Jimmie cut in. "What I want to know is why he didn't have those assassins pinched? They tried to kill him, didn't they? Well, then, they ought to have been pinched! They would have been, here."

"I know the answer!" Carl returned. "I heard him talking with the peelers up in Maine. He told them that he couldn't spare the time to stay and prosecute. The officers didn't like that, but I guess he made it all right with the—you know how to make it right with a cop!"

The lad, in explanation, put one hand behind his back, palm upwards, and wiggled his fingers, as if waiting for something to be handed to him.

"That's the way he manipulated the porter, too," Carl went on. "I saw him giving him a yellowback, and heard him telling the coon not to disturb us until it was absolutely necessary."

"I guess he's got money to burn!" Jimmie observed. "May be that is what he is going to the burning mountains of Mexico for, to burn his money? No? Yes? I don't think!"

"Carl burned a lot of it for him when he threw a pail of water on the fire in the cottage!" laughed Ben. "But he seems to have plenty more."

"He's swell!" Jimmie exclaimed. "I wonder how much he is going to pay us? I'd like some mazuma in advance, for these clothes are certainly beyond recall! We all look like old clo' men!"

"I reckon we don't need to get any pay, after his taking us out of the wet old Atlantic! We would have lasted about one hour more! He can get my services for nothing from this time on!"

"But we've got to eat and be clothed!" Jimmie insisted. "I'd like a beefsteak right now, to crowd the smell of smoke out of my stomach, and a new suit of clothes in which to visit the boys. Can't go out this way."

"That's what's troubling me, visiting the boys!" Ben explained. "We spent their money for the boat, and then lost the boat! They all lose their summer vacation on the coast! I don't know what they will say to us, but I've got a hunch that there will be a mess over it. Some of 'em won't believe the story about the wreck, and Sand Island, and the flying machine, and the burning cottage. You see!"

"Come to think of it, I can't see as they can be blamed for not believing this magic lamp story of ours!" grinned Jimmie. "It sounds like a pipe dream! But what are we going to do about it?"

"We're in a nice fix!" Ben grumbled, and Carl and Jimmie began beating him on the back and pulling him about the little lavatory.

"Go to it!" Jimmie cried. "You forgot to grumble all through our troubles up in Maine, and now you can roar like a grizzly bear if you feel like it. We wouldn't feel at home without your roars!"

Presently Havens returned, looking fresh and hopeful, as if he had been in his bed all night, instead of fighting for his life up on the coast of Maine. He beckoned the boys into the section they had occupied and faced them, a grave look on his face, his hands rattling keys in his pockets.

"Now, boys," he began, "we've got to come to some agreement, financially. You've gone and lost all the money put into your hands by the newsboys, and spoiled three suits of clothes, and burned a perfectly good cottage for a poor man. What have you to say for yourselves?"

The lads were so astonished at this outburst of seeming criticism that they had nothing whatever to say for themselves! It was Ben who finally brought himself to the point of stating their side of the case, but he did in his own way, which was, perhaps, the very best way he could have done it—the best and most convincing way of stating their side of the case!

"Of course," he began, "we've done all you say we have, but there's some things you haven't men-

tioned at all. Why don't you go on and tell about how we knocked the heads off three murderers in a deserted house? I think you ought to bunch all our offenses, now you're at it!"

"Good!" laughed Havens. "Very good! You have stated your defense with the brevity and the directness of a criminal lawyer! Your knocking the heads off the three men—best use I ever saw baseball talent put to!—wipes out all the rest. Only for that, I'm afraid I shouldn't be here this minute! But, now, we've got to come to some arrangement about your salaries, if you are going to the burning mountains of Mexico with me. How much do you think you ought to have, a month?"

The man's face was sober, but there was a laugh in his eyes as he waited for the boys to answer the important question.

"Just new clothes and board!" Jimmie finally declared.

"That's what I was going to say!" cried Ben.

"That suits me!" cut in Carl, glad of the chance to agree with the others on so grave a detail. "I'm all right if I eat and keep warm!"

"That is all very well," Havens said, "but what about the money you want to pay back to the newsboys? What about their vacations?"

The boys looked so dejected at this that Havens relented.

"Thanks to information gained from Carl," he

said, "I found those boys down on the Bowery this morning, at their rooms near Cooper Union, as you know, and made settlement with them in your name. They are satisfied, and send greeting to you. They are crazy about the trip you are to have!"

"How much did you pay them?" demanded Ben. "They are robbers!"

"Well," laughed Havens, "they are going to spend the summer on the coast! And, now, enough of that. You all know that clothing house out on Third avenue? The one nearest here?"

Of course they knew it! Many a time they had stood in front of the great display windows and dressed themselves, in their minds! in the very best garments shown there. Of course they knew it!

"Well, then, go down there and buy all the clothes you want. I have arranged everything. But before you go, I want to tell you that they will be charged to your accounts, and that you are not going to get more than one hundred dollars a month each—not right at the start."

The boys endeavored to express their appreciation of this munificent proposition, but failed to find words in which to do so. One hundred dollars a month each, and nothing to do but to ride about the country in flying machines! It was like a page out of a dream book!

"Understand," Havens continued, "you will be in peril of your lives most of the time! We shall

use all the precautions possible, but there are perils in the air and in the mountains, and, I'm afraid, the men we encountered up in Maine will be rather active in trying to bring our expedition to failure. In other words, we'll be in a mess most of the time while we are gone! If you are ready, we'll leave here as soon as you have bought your clothing."

"But where's the flying machines?" demanded Jimmie. "I haven't seen anything of them yet."

"Do you expect to find flying machines in a Pullman car?" demanded Carl, with a laugh. "Shall we return here?" he added, addressing Havens.

"Come back to that little hotel over the way," replied Havens. "You can breakfast and dress there, and then we'll take the car for Long Island, where my cars are waiting for us, ready for the flight, or will be by the time we get over there. Hurry up with your breakfast and your purchases, now!"

The boys hastened away, wondering if they had come to a land where everything was just as every one wished! They bought their outfits, put them on at the hotel, ate hearty breakfasts, and in an hour were at the hangar on Long Island, looking clean and handsome in their new suits.

The arrangements were perfected in a short time, and about noon the boys were given their first lesson in riding in the air. They all thought it great fun,

and before long Ben was able to control a machine while taking short flights with Mr. Havens. By nightfall all the boys had learned how to handle a machine so as to keep it up, send it down, or turn from side to side; still, they were by no means competent to go out on a trip alone.

Of course there were still many things to learn, for it often takes weeks to become a perfect master of a flying machine. But, as Mr. Havens was always to be within reaching distance, it was considered safe for Ben to start out on short stretches south with the machine in which Jimmie and himself were to ride.

The boys studied the mechanism of the machines until nearly daylight, then slept a couple of hours. At ten o'clock the *Sarah*, named for the machine which had been wrecked on the island, and the *Ann* lifted from the level yards and took the current of air blowing southwest.

At that moment Ben, in charge of the *Ann*, was the proudest as well as the happiest boy in the world! He was actually in charge of a flying machine. The two aeroplanes flew low and made frequent stops during the day, in order to give the boys an opportunity of learning all the quirks and unaccountable motions of an aeroplane.

They stopped at night in a level field surrounded by a rim of large trees, the ocean some thirty miles away. Havens produced very thin oiled silk tent-

ing from a parcel and soon a shelter which would turn rain was provided and a fire built in front of it.

Coverings of oiled silk were also placed over the machines, and then the lads set about making coffee and warming tinned goods at the roaring fire. People living in that vicinity soon gathered, and Havens took pride in explaining the mechanism of the machines. One of the visitors was very inquisitive and kept handling the motors, so he was ordered away.

He left the camp with a malevolent glare in his eyes.

"I'll get even with you fresh city folks," he declared.

CHAPTER VIII.

BETWEEN EARTH AND SKY.

"THAT yokel would do us an injury if he got a chance," Ben said, to a man who stood nearby, as the fellow turned away. "I don't like his looks, anyway."

"He is known here as a prison bird," a farmer replied. "He has been in some jail in New York City for a month or two. The papers say he was released yesterday morning. Seems to me he got here quickly for a man without money."

"Yes," interrupted another visitor, "you fellows would better look a little out to-night. He is just mean enough to work a mischief to one of your machines. I'm told he knows something about aeroplanes, having been employed at a hangar in New York. He's none too good to steal one of your flyers—not a bit too good! Yes, yes, watch the machines!"

The visitors left the camp about ten o'clock, and Havens and the three boys gathered at the entrance to their tent, which faced the fire.

"Before we lie down," the aviator said, "I'm going to tell you boys exactly where we are going, so, if we should become parted in a gale, or in any way, we can meet at the point we seek."

"That's a good idea!" cried Ben. "What would I know about the trip if the *Sarah* should run away from the *Ann*!"

"If we are parted," Havens went on, "make for Tuscacuesco, which is a mite of a town high up on the Sierra Madre mountains, in the Mexican state of Jalisco. The location is not far from a hundred miles from the Pacific ocean. If anything happens, go straight there. You can find it on any good map of Mexico, about 19 north by 101 west."

"That ought to be easy to find," Carl suggested. "I could find it!"

"You just think so!" laughed Jimmie.

"And, in order that you may not be without resources, in case we should become parted," Havens continued, "I'm going to trust each one of you with one hundred dollars—a sort of emergency fund!"

"That is a heap of money!" Jimmie chuckled. "Suppose we run away with the whole boodle, and take an airship with us? What would you do?"

"Why, I'd catch you!" replied Havens. "Catch you quick!"

"Is the burning mountains near this place?" asked Carl.

"Not far away," Havens replied. "Not far away, but the way is not smooth. We'll have to land on the mountain itself from the machines! That will be dangerous, so you boys must not attempt it alone."

"What is there at the burning mountains you want?" asked Ben, abruptly. "There it is out!" he laughed. "I've long been wanting to ask you that question, but I hardly dared do it, as you might think it impertinent."

"I don't know whether what I want is there or not," was the unexpected reply. "There are legends that the gold in Mexico extends far south of Sonora, where most of it had been found. There are legends, too, that an ancestor of mine once visited an extinct volcano in Jalisco and saw gold there in great quantities."

"Then we're after gold are we?" asked Ben, with wide-open eyes.

"And there is another legend," Havens continued, "that when he went back after this gold the crater was found to be filled with burning lava, so the quest had to be abandoned at that time. It is now said that the lava in that crater, influenced by the activity of Colima, a volcano not far away, rises and falls at certain seasons of the year, that when the lava is out there are millions of dollars worth of gold in sight, and that when the lava fills the crater again nothing is to be seen but the melted stone and

minerals of the Sierra Madre range. There are other legends which it is not necessary for me to repeat here."

"Does this lava rise and fall like the tide?" asked Carl.

"Just about, though not so often; once a month, it is said."

"Has no one ever entered it at low tide?" asked Ben, thoughtfully. "I should think hundreds would be after that gold."

"There are only a few who know anything about it, and there is only one set of maps pointing the way to it," replied Havens.

The boys were silent for a moment, and then Jimmie asked:

"Does the man who put up that fight against you up in Maine know?"

Havens was silent for a moment and then replied, thoughtfully.

"Yes, he knows about the legends. In fact, he claims that the discovery was made by an ancestor of his own, and that I am an interloper in the game of hide-and-seek with the crater! He has headed two expeditions to the burning mountains, as they are called by the native Indians, but has never, as he claims, found the right crater.

"You see," Havens continued, "he has no maps to go by, while I have. The maps constitute my proof as to the legitimacy of my claim to the gold,

if it is really there. They came down to me from the ancestor who first searched for the treasure. It was in the hope of securing the maps that he lured me to Maine by a false letter."

"It was a pretty good thing for us that he did!" exclaimed Jimmie. "If he hadn't, we should have been swept into the ocean by the tide!"

"And if he hadn't," Havens added, "I should have lost the company of three loyal youngsters who seem to be able to face almost any peril with courage and resourcefulness!"

"Tell us more about the burning mountain!" urged Carl, blushing at this praise.

"There is little more that I can tell," Havens admitted. "It is said that there is gold under the particular mountain we are to visit, and that when the lava comes up it melts and is thrown out, only to drop down again when the lava subsides. It is a sort of a wild goose chase we are going on; still, I have a liking for such adventures, and, again, I have nothing else to do. Now, perhaps, we'd better turn in. It will soon be morning, and we must be on our way."

Ben said nothing to the others regarding what he had learned from the farmer of the man who had been driven out of the camp for meddling with the motors. He had only his suspicions to go by, and he thought it unnecessary to alarm his companions.

He wrapped himself in a blanket when the others

entered the tent and took his place by the entrance, from which both machines could be seen.

It was eleven o'clock of a brilliant moonlit night. It was still quite cool, for the spring was not far advanced, and the fire in front of the shelter sent forth a grateful warmth. At first the lad kept wide awake without effort, but the previous night had been a wakeful one, and he soon nodded at his self-imposed vigil.

It seemed to him as if he had scarcely closed his eyes when he awoke with a start. For an instant he could not locate the thing which had stirred his subconscious self. Something had communicated to him a sense of impending danger, but he did not know what it was!

Then the short, quick, snappy scolding of a gasoline motor reached his ears. The sound seemed far away, yet every explosion was distinctly heard. The moon had passed quite a distance to the west, showing that his sleep had not been a short one, but the sky was still filled with its radiance, and the field, the machines, and the objects surrounding the camp were bathed in soft light.

The boy moved cautiously out of the tent and anxiously searched the sky for an explanation of the sounds. His first impression had been that one of the machines had been taken away, but they both lay in view, just where they had been left.

This point settled, he looked above for some hostile approach by way of the air. He recalled what

the farmer had said of the jailbird being familiar with flying machines, and suspected that the fellow had been sent to make trouble for them by those who had so signally failed on the coast of Maine. But there was no aeroplane in sight. In a moment the clamor of the motors he had heard died away.

"Some passing motorcycle," he thought, and dropped back in his blanket again. "I won't be caught sleeping now," he promised himself.

For a wonder he did manage to keep awake, but it was hard work for a time. Then he was wide awake enough. He saw a figure stealing from the line of trees which skirted the field, moving toward the machines.

The boy could not see the intruder's face, but his sneaking attitude and his evident desire to advance without making any noise, convinced him that this was the person who had been ordered away from the camp, and who had been described by the farmer as a jailbird.

"Anyway," Ben thought, "the way the fellow moves is proof enough that he is here on some evil errand. I'll just lie low and watch him."

The man, bending almost to the earth in his efforts at concealment, slowly approached the aeroplanes, circling as far from the fire as it was possible to do and still reach the goal he aimed for. Ben watched him with hushed breath, waiting for him to make a motion to touch one of the machines.

The boy held in his hand an automatic revolver

which Havens had presented to him, but he had no intention of using it on the prowler.

It was his purpose to seize and hold him until his identity could be established. He reached out to awaken Jimmie, so as to have help after he had grappled with the intruder, but the boy had rolled farther into the tent and was beyond the reach of his hand.

Then the unwelcome visitor reached out to lift the covering from the *Ann*, and Ben crept forward, approaching the meddler from the rear.

When he came close enough to the fellow to seize him, the oiled silk covering had already been snatched off the motors, and the motors themselves were under inspection. The boy decided to wait a minute longer before seizing the scamp and arousing the camp.

This decision brought him into great peril. The fellow had been busy about the aeroplane longer than Ben had figured on, for the boy's approach had been too cautious to be rapid. Besides, as subsequent events showed, the visitor was an adept in the handling of a machine, so far as getting it into the air quick was concerned.

Almost before the boy realized what was going on, he saw a quick star of light in the other's hand, heard the clatter of a moving motor, and then, to his great amazement, the *Ann*, ran swiftly over the smooth earth where the landing had been made and swung upward!

It had all been done so quickly that the boy stood for just the fraction of a heartbeat like one in a daze. His limited knowledge of the aeroplane did not include any technical skill which would enable one to get a machine into the air in such short time as that!

Both machines, the *Sarah* and the *Ann*, he knew, were fashioned after the latest models, and boasted, besides, many inventions of which Havens was the sole owner. One of these was an appliance which gave quick action to the motors, and another was an invention which gave unusual control from the seat.

But this dazed condition of the boy's brain and body lasted only a fraction of a heartbeat, as has been said. As the machine lifted to take the air, he sprang at it and, seizing the fastenings between the rubber-tired wheels, attempted to draw it back to the ground.

He might as well have tried to hold a powerful automobile on the highway by the exertion of his strength. The *Ann* lifted, seemingly not at all troubled by the extra weight, and Ben went up with it!

He saw what sort of a predicament he would be in, in a moment, but, determined to do all that lay in his power to retrieve the stolen machine, he clung desperately on.

When he saw that all his efforts would be of no avail, he was too high up in the air to drop. The driver, from his seat above, could not at first see the lad swinging there in space, but directly he knew that he was there, and Ben heard him laughing maliciously.

The starting of the motors had awakened the

others in the camp, and all had rushed out in time to see Ben clinging to the machine, then some distance from the ground! They shouted to him to take chances on a drop, but the wind was in his ears, and he did not hear what they said.

Up went the machine! The boy's arms and hands were failing!

CHAPTER IX.

A MILL AND A FRIENDLY TREE.

IT seemed to Ben that every second he clung there would be his last. His fingers grew numb, his arms seemed to be pulling from their sockets. His head swam and his eyes closed at thought of the awful fall which was only a breath away!

Still, he clung desperately on. There was yet a shadow of hope in his heart. The man who had stolen the *Ann* so cleverly might be a thief, a convict, but he might not be a murderer! He might, after a time, drop down so that a fall would not be fatal! So he hoped and held on.

Presently the motion of the aeroplane told the boy that the driver was doing something which made it necessary for him to move about in his seat. The balance was disturbed and the planes moved uncertainly.

Then, to his great relief, Ben saw a looped rope drop down before his eyes. It sank lower and lower until the loop was on a level with his feet. It promised relief, but Ben did not know but it might be a trap to induce him to release his hold, and so drop to death.

However, the lad reasoned, he would soon drop anyway, and he might as well trust a part of his weight to the loop. He waited until it swung under

him and caught it with one foot. Then he tested its fastening above with only half his weight. At least that was his intention.

But the instant a portion of the strain was removed from his hands and arms they seemed to lose what little strength remained in them.

He had only time to drop both feet into the loop, wind his numb arms about the rope, and inhale a deep breath before the collapse came. Only for the sure grasp he had secured on the rope he would have fallen.

There he swayed in midair in the swing thus provided. He at first wondered, dully, why his presence there did not cause the machine to turn turtle, then he saw that his weight, as long as the line remained vertical, steadied the machine instead of tipping it, for he hung exactly in the middle, under the motors.

The next thought that came into his slowly clearing mind was this:

Why had the driver rescued him from immediate death? What would he do with him? He realized that he was as completely in the power of the thief as if the white moonlight through which he swung made a wall of steel.

Not being able to satisfactorily answer either of these questions, the boy turned his attention to the driver himself. He could see the well-defined shadow of the man as it struck the lower plane, but he could not see the man himself. He called out to him, but received no reply.

Perhaps the thief did not hear him. Perhaps he did not want to receive any communication from the boy whose life he had, for the time being, saved.

Perhaps he was only waiting for a more secure—or lonely—piece of country in which to send him down to his death. Was ever a lad in such a position before, perilous yet still unique?

After a time the lad knew that the driver was making for the ocean, that he had reversed the direction taken that morning by Havens. Was he going back to New York, or would he turn presently and speed toward Mexico and the burning mountains? More questions for which Ben found no answer! Finally the lad regained sufficient composure to look about.

Away to the west burned the lights of Trenton. To the south and west were the lights of Philadelphia, miles and miles away. In the air—still save for the clamor of the motors—he thought he detected the beating of the surf. The campfire had long since passed from view.

He had no doubt that at that very moment his chums were searching the groves and fields about the camp for his mangled body. They had seen him suspended by his hands, high up in the air, and they would not, of course, know that the thief who had stolen the *Ann* had developed a streak of humanity at last and temporarily preserved his life by making a swing for his feet.

The boy shivered in his airy swing. The wind blew cold off the sea, and the machine was driving dead against it. His arms grew numb again.

After what seemed an age the driver lowered the aeroplane over a body of water and leaned far over in front to look down upon him.

Ben could not see his face, only the top of his head, but he could hear what he said quite distinctly,

for the motors were at low speed and there was no great rush of air in his ears. The man spoke slowly.

"How do you like it down there?" he asked, in a jeering tone.

"It might be warmer!" Ben called back, trying hard to keep the shiver out of his voice. "It might be better to sit, too," he added.

"Would you like me to land and take you up on the seat?" was the next question, still so insulting in character that Ben grew angry.

"Just as you like," he answered, seeing no hope in the talk.

"Or would you like to have me cut the rope and give you a bath down there?" continued the driver. "That is a lonely bit of water at night."

"I was about to remark as much," Ben answered, coolly.

"The headwaters of the Metedeconk river," the other explained. "The bit we are over now is a millpond—a large one, as you see."

The driver dropped the aeroplane until it was only a few feet above the water and then swung around the pond. Now and then he shook the rope, and with it the machine, as if to further torment the boy with the fear of instant death.

"I think, on the whole," he said, after circling the pond several times—he appeared to be an expert aviator, and to have perfect control of the machine—"that I'll take you out to the Atlantic and drop you. You might swim out if I dropped you in the pond."

"What do you want to drop me anywhere for?" shivered Ben. "Why not land with me and go

on about your business. You've got the machine, and that ought to satisfy you, I think."

"Young man," answered the aviator, "if you could see the smash I've got on the head you wouldn't think so! A boy up in Maine gave me that smash. Have you any idea who that boy was? He's a good ball pitcher!"

"So you're one of the men who wrecked the machine up there, are you?" asked Ben, the discovery almost sending hope out of his breast.

"I'm one of them," was the short reply. "The others are laid up!"

"I'm glad of that!" Ben answered. "They ought to be dead!"

"You're a nervy cub, anyway!" replied the aviator.

He continued to swing in circles, as if not quite decided in his own mind what to do with the boy. At one end of the body of water was a mill from which a light flickered over the water, and, as if impelled by curiosity, he approached closer to this point every time he circled the pond.

Ben could see men running out of the building, and knew that they were watching the machine. Whether they could see the plight he was in, he had no means of knowing, but, even if they did, there was no way in which they could come to his rescue.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," the driver finally said. "If you'll tell me what you know about the place Havens is heading for, I'll take you up in the seat and use you well until we get to Mexico."

"I don't know anything about the locality he is going to," was Ben's short reply, as he swung al-

most over the mill and caught sight of uplifted faces.

"Promise to tell me what you do know, be it much or little, and I'll take you up. If you don't I'll fly over to the Atlantic and drop you."

Ben did not know what course to pursue. He did not know enough about Havens' destination to make that friend any trouble even if he did tell all he knew. Still, he did not like to give way to coercion!

Besides, there was a tall tree by the mill, and that tall tree held many crooked branches! If the aviator would only sail directly over that, there might be no necessity of coming to a decision on the proposition put forth by the thief!

The lad thought he saw a way to rescue himself, recapture the *Ann*, and bring the thief to punishment, but it was a bold and dangerous step that would have to be taken. Still, he decided to take that step if he got a chance.

This, briefly, was the plan maturing in his mind:

If the machine passed over the tree, he would reach up as far as possible and cut one strand of the ropes with his knife. The loop hung down about six feet, therefore, if he could cut one of the arms of the swing near the top, he would have nearly twelve feet of rope to hang from. The question was this:

Would the driver drop low enough when above the tree so that this length of cord would bring him to the branches? Another important question was:

Would the cutting of the rope and the throwing of his weight on one arm of it seriously tip the aeroplane? He knew that the *Ann* was provided with

cleverly-constructed balancing apparatus, still he believed that the throwing of his weight to one side would make it sway and tip frightfully.

Then, when he gained the branches of the tree and the machine tipped, would the thief shut off the power for his own protection? If he did, this would cause the aeroplane to remain stationary in the air for a moment, if the one cord held it back, and then drop.

Next, could he warp the rope about a limb so that the aeroplane would not leave the circumference of the tree? It was a daring trick the boy planned, but he was in a desperate situation, and it seemed to him that any plight he might land in would be an improvement on the landing planned for him by the thief.

The aeroplane circled round and round the pond, coming closer to the mill and the tree at each turn. The driver knew himself to be attracting the admiration of the men who had come out of the mill, and he appeared to take delight in "showing off." Many a man has come to disgrace and ruin because of the same instinct!

At last the machine circled over the tree! The boy was not ready to act. Would the driver follow that viewless path in the air again?

Ben got his knife out, twisted his left arm into the rope, and, reaching up, began to cut. He knew that one slash would not sever the hard rope, and counted on having it weakened so that it would drop apart when a final cut was given over the tree.

The machine was proceeding slowly, and when it came to the tree once more the boy cut the

final strand. The aeroplane tipped toward the tree and the driver cried out in alarm as it swayed perilously above the branches.

Ben struck the very top of the upper branches and plunged through, still holding the rope in his hand. He knew that he had suffered many scratches and bruises, but had no notion of releasing his hold on the cord which had in a measure broken his fall.

Presently he heard the motors give one rattling explosion and stop. The aeroplane strained at the rope, caught round a great limb, for just a second and then struck the top of the tree, not in the center, as Ben had, but toward one side, so that it crashed over the ends of the great limbs and settled easily to the earth with a protesting bump which told of possible wreckage.

Ben was safe in the tree, but the aviator caught at branch after branch as he slipped down and finally fell to the ground, where he lay without movement. Ben clambered down and found the men from the mill gathered around him. One of them seized Ben by the arm.

"You wrecked that machine!" the captor cried. "You have killed this man! You'll hang for this, for it was a deliberate act."

Ben seemed to get out of one danger only to stumble into another! The thief now opened his eyes and, realizing what had taken place, sprang hastily to his feet, threatening the boy with a clenched fist.

"You villain!" he shouted. "I saved this boy's life by throwing him a loop when he was about to fall," he added, turning to the men, "and now he

has wrecked the machine. Arrest him, and I'll see if I can repair the aeroplane so I can get away with it. He's slippery! Hold him fast!"

Angry and indignant, Ben then told his story and asked that they both be held until the truth of his words could be proven.

"If there's a 'phone here I'll soon prove him a liar," shouted the thief, turning to the mill. "I'll soon convince you!"

He rushed off to the mill, unguarded, and Ben stood waiting. Both he and the millmen waited some moments, but he did not return!

When they reached the mill he had disappeared!

CHAPTER X.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF JIMMIE.

WHEN Havens arrived at the old mill there was a blush of sunrise in the sky. Ben had used the 'phone at the mill immediately after the disappearance of the thief, and had finally succeeded in arousing a farmer living near the camp and inducing him to communicate his message to the ones waiting there.

Havens had started immediately in the *Sarah*, leaving Jimmie and Carl at the tent. He had had some difficulty in finding the mill, and so it had been a long wait for Ben.

When he alighted from the *Sarah*—creating a great sensation among the millmen and the farmers who had gathered, of course—he found Ben examining the injured aeroplane by the light of a lantern, with a circle of faces around him—some inquisitive, some suspicious.

The boy's head was bandaged, for he had received a long wound on the scalp just above the right ear, and one arm was tied up in a rude sling.

Ben arose as Havens approached and said to the crowd:

"This is Louis Havens, the noted aviator! Perhaps you'll believe what he says about me, instead of believing that thief who ran away at the first opportunity. This is his machine."

There were in the crowd several who had witnessed flights made by Havens, and so the skyman had no difficulty in establishing the truth of Ben's narrative. He laughed as the boy repeated his story, briefly.

"I can't understand why the machine didn't tip and become unmanagable as you swayed in the swing," he said. "I have been in this business for a long time, but I have never heard anything like that before."

"I kept pretty stiff in the swing," Ben explained, "still, when he circled the pond, I could not help swinging out a little, and when the machine was driving straight ahead at a swift pace I could not help tilting out behind. Why wouldn't a two-story aeroplane be all right?" he added, with a smile. "Where do these military machines carry their explosives, anyway?"

"Some of them carry loads beneath the seats," was the reply, "but I don't believe any of them swing such weights so far down."

"Well, this ride of mine may have been a freak," Ben said, "but it wasn't a pleasant one. I don't want another like it!"

"How do you find the *Ann*?" asked Havens, taking the lantern from the boy's hand and bending over the machine as it lay on the ground.

"I can't find anything much the matter with it," Ben answered. "You see, it slid down on the ends of the branches, and so escaped a long fall, which would have busted the motors! I think it will run all right!"

With the assistance of the millmen the aeroplane was lifted out to a level stretch of road in front of the mill. There, when the sun came up, the aviator made a thorough examination of the machinery and planes, and decided that it would soon fly as if nothing had happened to it. When at last the aeroplane was ready to take the air, Havens turned to the boy with a quizzical smile on his face.

"Can you drive her back?" he asked, "or do you want to ride back with me and leave her here until we come this way on our journey south?"

"Why shouldn't I drive her back?" asked Ben, surprised at the nature of the question, and a little indignant, too. "Why not?"

"I thought that, perhaps, you had had enough of air rides," Havens answered. "Sometimes a terrible experience in the air renders one absolutely unfit to ever take charge of a machine again."

"You'll see whether I'm unfit or not!" Ben cried, mounting into the seat. "I'm going to beat you back to the camp! Get a move on!"

"When we saw you hanging to the underwork of the machine," Havens went on, "we had no idea that we would ever see you alive again. We were all overjoyed when the farmer came to the camp with the message."

The millmen urged the two to remain with them for breakfast, but they were anxious to get back to Jimmie and Carl, so did not avail themselves of the kind invitation. In an hour they were back with the others, Ben as happy and alert as ever, and certain of recovering from his scalp wound and his sprained wrist in a day or two.

They breakfasted there by the campfire, surrounded, of course, by an admiring group of farmers, all of whom congratulated Ben on his courage and his narrow escape. Ben received his honors timidly, for he was not used to being made a hero of, and tried his best to hurry the departure.

"Well," Jimmie laughed, "if you hadn't stuck to the machine, we would have lost it! Then we'd have been out a trip to Mexico by way of the air. I guess we'll vote you a medal and let it go at that!"

After the morning meal the effects were snugly packed and the machines made ready to take the air. Havens drew out a map and made a few marks on it with a pencil while the boys looked on, interested.

"It is about twenty-six hundred miles to the place where we are going," he explained, "but we are not

going to try to make it in two days and two nights, which, I fully believe, we might do, as both of these machines have made better than a mile a minute on long runs, and both have remained in the air twelve hours."

"That breaks the record!" exclaimed Carl, who had bought books on aviation in New York and had read them diligently whenever opportunity offered. "That's the endurance record, isn't it?"

"I think not," was the reply. "The French and German aviators have done better than that. However, we are not going to attempt to make any records whatever. We will travel about three hundred and fifty miles each day and rest up at night. This will bring us to Charleston, West Virginia, to-night, so here we go!"

Those were golden days for the flying machine boys. Usually they flew low so as to get perfect views of the country over which they were passing, and with the idea, also, of taking fewer risks, as the lads were not sufficiently advanced in the science of aviation to be permitted to operate a machine without the constant attention of Mr. Havens.

One reason why traveling in an airship is so fascinating is that many things of interest not visible when on the ground may be seen from the heights above. In passing over lakes and rivers minute objects may be seen, on calm days, to the depth of fifty feet or more, and in sailing over woods timid

animals may be seen scampering among the trees and bushes which would never be seen by one on the earth.

The stars at night, too, seem clearer, larger, brighter, than when seen through the heavy atmosphere which surrounds the lower levels of the air. Besides, there is a sense of freedom, of being master of fate, which is experienced in no other situation yet reached by man.

The boys rode about three hundred and fifty miles each day, as mapped out by Havens, and rested at night. This distance was covered in about eight hours, which provided for two short stops.

Their camping places were near, Charleston, West Virginia; Nashville, Tennessee; Jackson, Mississippi; Galveston, Texas; Monteray, Mexico; Zacatecas, Mexico; and Zapotlan, Mexico. On the morning of the eighth day, a clear, sunshiny, breezy morning on the mountains, they first set their eyes on the peaks they were to invade.

They had had clear weather all through the journey, for a wonder, and had met with no serious accidents. During the first flight or two they had listened for the clamor of another aeroplane in the sky, but had not found one.

However, they could not believe that the men who had followed Havens to the coast of Maine, and who had pursued him to the fields of New Jersey, would drop the chase, so they kept close watch,

night and day, all through the journey. Inquiries along the route failed to locate any other machines in the air, but this only convinced Havens that his enemies were taking a route farther to the east, probably over the ocean.

Zapotlan stands high up on the mountains, nearly one hundred miles from the Pacific ocean. To the west lies a mountain lake of, perhaps, ten miles in length by half that in width. To the south the most important object in view is the peak of Nevada de Colima, which rises over 14,000 feet above sea level.

Still farther south, and somewhat to the east, rises the peak of the only important volcano in the state of Jalisco, Volcano de Colima, about 13,000 feet above the ocean. It was in the section between the two white peaks that the boys were to look for the crater which was said to be stocked with gold.

The lake west of Zapotlan is almost entirely surrounded by great crags, but the lads managed to find one level space, not far from the city, and there they spent the night, with Jimmie and Carl both on guard, for the people of the city flocked about the machines like ants gathering around a lump of sugar.

Zapotlan is a city of perhaps 25,000 population, and is distinctively a Mexican town. There are plenty of native Indians in this district of Jalisco, and they, too, hovered near the wonderful airships, the like of which they had never heard of before.

The next morning, leaving Jimmie and Carl asleep and Ben on guard, Havens went up into the city to purchase supplies, and also to make inquiries as to whether any other flying machines had been seen lately in that vicinity. He spoke Spanish like a native, and so had no difficulty in transacting his business.

Gonzalez, the merchant with whom he did business, was a clever fellow who had made several trips to New York, and who spoke English with only a little stagger, as Jimmie called it, later on. He had heard rumors of the gold hidden by Nature in that vicinity, and was frankly curious as to the purpose of his customer's visit.

When asked as to whether any aeroplanes had been seen over the mountains in that vicinity during the past week, he looked up with a smile of suspicion and asked:

"Why should you suppose other flying machines have found their way here? Surely, this city is not on any of the air routes!"

"You do not answer my question," Havens smiled, seeing that the fellow was curious to know his business there. "It is of the greatest importance to me to know whether other aviators have visited this section lately. If one or more have been here you ought to know it."

"But why should they come to an out-of-the-way city like this?" insisted the merchant. "Give me some reason for their coming!"

"I don't know why any other aviator should come here," Havens replied, "unless he came for the same reason that I did, for the sake of adventure. I heard in New York that one was coming, and I have been trying to get here first. That is all I can say."

The merchant looked Havens knowingly in the face. The fellow evidently had notions of his own as to whether adventure constituted the only reason for the appearance of these airships at that point.

Havens left the store with a feeling that the merchant really knew something of his quest, and that he also had knowledge of the recent arrival of others on the same errand. When he reached the camp, after making his purchases and arranging for their delivery, he found Ben sitting, well wrapped up in his thickest blankets, for the air was very cold, in front of the tent and Carl asleep inside.

"Where is Jimmie?" he asked, not without a trace of alarm in his voice. "I hope he hasn't wandered off anywhere."

"Why," replied Ben, "shortly after you left an Indian came here with that note you sent asking him to come to the city."

"The note I sent!" exclaimed Havens, now filled with anxiety. "I sent no note! Which way did they go? We must lose no time in following on after him, for there is treachery in the very air!"

CHAPTER XI.

AN AEROPLANE BEYOND CONTROL.

JIMMIE, summoned away from the camp by the note purporting to have been sent by Havens, tramped along by the side of the Indian with a light heart. At last he was in the country he had heard so much about, had so longed to visit, at last he was in the way of meeting with adventures which would, he hoped, prove worth while!

Just how far his hopes in this last particular were realized, the future will show! As the two, the Indian and the boy, came to an angle of rock which would shut out a view of the camp, he turned and waved a hand at Ben, sitting alone in the chill air, closely wrapped. Neither knew under what peculiar circumstances they were to meet the next time!

After walking half a mile or so over rough ground, the boy stopped and faced his guide, who sullenly motioned to him to proceed.

"Look here, Red Jacket," Jimmie exclaimed, applying to the fellow the first Indian name that came into his mind, "you said Havens wanted me to

meet him in the city. What about it? We're going away from the city."

Red Jacket, as Jimmie persisted in calling him, pointed ahead and seized the boy by the arm, as if determined to drag him along at a swifter pace. Jimmie resented this and drew back, suspicious, now, that all was not as it should be.

"Not for mine!" he shouted. "I'm going back to camp!"

Red Jacket made no answer except to wave a hand in what seemed to the boy to be a peculiar manner. The next instant a lasso shot out from behind a rock and settled over the lad's head, binding both arms tightly to his sides. He looked at one captive arm and then at the other and faced the Indian, his face white, his eyes flashing.

"That's your game, is it?" he demanded. "You're a liar, are you? The note never came from Havens at all, eh? What next?"

"You'll find that out when you come to it," was the reply, in perfectly good English. "Little boys shouldn't ask questions!"

"So you're not an Indian, either?" Jimmie sneered. "Say," he went on, "I'd like to know if there's anything around here that is on the square! Where's the fellow that threw this rope?"

"You're wrong about my not being an Indian, as you Gringos call us native Mexicans," the other answered. "I was born in these mountains, but I

have not always lived here. Not so very long ago I returned here from New York City—New York, the sordid!”

“So you don’t like the little old town, eh?” Jimmie panted, pulling at the rope. “I wish I had you there a short time. I’d settle you!”

“I appreciate your kind intentions,” sneered the other. “But you’d better stop pulling at that rope. You are only drawing it tighter. Come along like a little man and you won’t be harmed.”

The person who had thrown the lasso did not make his appearance, but the native took the line into his hands and kept it lightly drawn around the boy’s arms, pulling him along at a rapid pace. Jimmie drew back for a time, but, seeing that this availed him nothing, he finally walked briskly along just behind his captor, like a led steer!

“You Mexicans have persuasive manners!” he grumbled, after a time.

The native only smiled grimly and quickened his pace. They walked for an hour or more, ascending ledges and dipping down into shallow canyons, always over difficult footing, until they came to a level valley set in between two ridges of rock.

There, much to his amazement, Jimmie was led to an aeroplane lying on the ground. The native bent over the machine for a moment and then turned to the boy with a significant gesture.

“You can operate that?” he asked. “You can take it into the air?”

Jimmie pondered a moment, not knowing what answer to make. He knew that with good luck he could manage the aeroplane for short distances, for he had learned much about flying machines during the journey from New York, but he did not know whether he ought to undertake it or not.

His thought naturally was that this machine belonged to the men who were pursuing Havens. It was, undoubtedly, the one in which the enemies of his friend had traveled from the north. It was a large machine, well fitted up for long distance flights. It seemed to be in good condition, and his first impression was that the aviator had met with some accident which prevented his operating it.

Afraid that, by handling it, he might be assisting those who had attempted Haven's life on the coast of Maine, he hesitated about admitting that he knew anything about driving it. Then the thought occurred to him that, by undertaking the task of operating the machine, he might be able to get it into the air and so escape from his captor and, if luck favored his efforts, deprive his enemies of the use of it.

This certainly was worth considering, but, before answering, he bent over the aeroplane and inspected it closely. The mechanism might be entirely unlike the machine he had been taught to run, and in that case he would not be able to handle it.

However, all the levers seemed perfectly familiar,

and he reached the conclusion that he could manage it if he thought best to do so. As he bent over the machine he saw two initials marked plainly on one of the wings. Looking closer, he saw that the letters were "G. R."

They appeared not once but several times, as if some one had been carelessly writing his initials during a moment of leisure. In one instance the letters "the Bow—" appeared after the initials.

While the native stood impatiently by his side the boy studied over the initials, trying to fit them to some name he knew. And those other letters? What would the word have been had it been completed?

"Can you drive it?" demanded the native, angry at the delay.

"I can tell by trying," Jimmie answered, "but you mustn't blame me if I smash it. I know little about flying machines."

"But you came from New York in one?" asserted the native.

"Yes, but there was an expert aviator in the party," was the reply.

"It is ready for flight," the native said, then. "We'll get in and see what you can do with it. Turn south when you get into the air and fly low, keeping behind the crags. And go as slowly as you like."

"Oh, you're going too?" asked Jimmie, all his

plans for escape from the native disappearing. "Then I'll take great joy in breaking your neck. Come along, if you want to risk it. I'm all ready."

The native drew a wicked-looking knife from his clothes and flashed it before the boy's eyes with a ferocious snarl.

"I shall be in the seat by your side," he said, "and if you play any tricks it won't be the fall that will finish you!"

"That will be nice!" Jimmie volunteered. "I never did like the thought of being killed by a fall. How's the gasoline?"

"Plenty!" was the impatient reply. "In with you."

During all this talk, at the back of the boy's brain had been the old query: "Whom did the initials represent?" And another query was forcing itself upon him. This was:

"What word would have been written if the writer had finished his work on it?"

The native inadvertently supplied the wished-for answer to this.

"The Bowery," he said, "would regard you as a hero if it could see you handling one of these machines in the mountains of Mexico!"

"The Bowery!" That was the answer to his question! The word might have been the "Bowery," the word which had been in the mind of the writer.

But who, from the Bowery, could have visited that lonely spot? Then the boy's brain caught a previous incident in New York. They had planned to visit Mexico, but only one had gone. Glenn Richards!

Could it be possible that Glenn Richards was here, that he had written his initials on the planes in the hope that some one would recognize them?

Jimmie decided to follow the clue until he ascertained whether his supposition was the correct one. It did not seem reasonable that Glenn was actually there, in those mountains! And, if he was there, how had he become involved with these brigands?

He said nothing to the native concerning the initials. He did not want him to know that he had ever known Glenn Richards. Satisfying himself that the machine really was ready for flight, he stepped into the seat beside the native, turned the small handle which took the place of the old-fashioned crank, and was off. His arms had been released in order that he might give all his attention to the levers, but constantly the native held the knife dangerously close to his side.

His intention, at first, had been to lift the aeroplane up to an altitude which would betray its presence there, in order that his friends might see it, but a motion of the native's arm warned him that this would be a dangerous thing for him to do.

"Keep down!" the native said, warningly.

"Keep down, and turn to the south. There! Behind those crags!"

There was no help for it, so the boy directed the machine as ordered, still studying over the wonderful possibility of Glenn Richards being there, and sent the aeroplane flying south. The motors worked perfectly, and seemed to have been given excellent care.

"Where is the man who brought this flying machine here?" he asked, forcing the words out against the rush of air. "Why doesn't he run it?"

The native shut his teeth tighter and waved toward the south.

Still flying low, the machine passed over Canyons and precipices, swung around uplifted crags, always following the pointing finger of the native. The boy could see wild bits of country lying between the mountains, trickles of water making their way toward the Pacific from the frozen tops above, yawning caverns in the vertical walls which faced the canyons. It was a giddy ride!

Many a time during that flight Jimmie's hair lifted as the machine swayed and trembled. He did not know the aeroplane well enough to understand what was the matter with it, having had, as the reader knows, only a brief experience with one.

Sometimes he seemed to lose control of it entirely, but it kept in the air, and moved in the direction he had at first taken. It was when sudden

turns became necessary that he felt his incompetence. Many times he regretted his action in trying to operate it, but there was nothing he could do now but keep on.

Presently the aeroplane became so unmanageable that he said to the native that he would have to drop down and try to ascertain what was wrong with it.

"Only a short distance farther," urged the other. "Keep in the air and make wider curves when you see a crag in the way."

Directly the native pointed to a peak which lifted many thousand feet above the others. From the summit of this peak trailed a thin banner of vapor or smoke, the boy could not distinguish which.

"There is a ledge half way up," the native said. "Make that. There is a landing place of good size. Put on full power!"

Jimmie had a notion that he would not be able to reach the ledge indicated, for the machine was unaccountably dropping down. The motors did not seem to be doing their duty. The native turned a frightened face to that of the boy.

"If you fail," he shouted, "I'll make you acquainted with this blade. Keep the machine going! If we must drop, drop on the ledge!"

Jimmie turned and looked into the other's eyes, a grim smile of determination on his face.

"If you don't drop that knife—now," he shouted, "I'll send the machine into that cliff ahead! Drop it NOW!"

The knife clattered down, and the machine headed for the ledge, falling steadily. At last it became evident that the ledge could not be reached. The aeroplane was sinking to the rocks below.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERIOUS WARNING.

"FOLLOW them!" echoed Ben. "How are we going to do it? There's so many wrinkles in these hills that we'd be lost on foot, and, besides, we couldn't leave the aeroplanes here without a guard. These muckers would steal them, piece by piece! What fools we were to believe that Indian!"

Carl came tumbling out of the tent, rubbing his eyes, and Havens hastened, without replying, to the aeroplanes.

"Who you going to follow? And who is it that's going to steal the machines?" Carl said, sleepily. "Show 'em to me!"

"Jimmie's gone and got himself carried off into captivity!" Ben explained, "and it is time we were out after him. But how?"

"Just jump into one of the flying machines," advised Carl, "and you'll soon catch him. How long has he been gone, and why did he go, and who lured him away, and why don't you tell me all about it?"

"If you'll quit asking questions," Ben interrupted, "I'll tell you all I know about it, and that isn't much! An Indian came here with a note from Mr. Havens, as he said—and lied!—and Jimmie went away with him. Now Mr. Havens says he sent no note, so Jimmie's been jobbed!"

"I should say so!" replied Carl. "What's the proposition?"

"You mean why did they do it? I have just given that up! Looks to me like a trick of the chaps we held social converse with up on the coast of Maine, though this may be only an attempt to pick up ready money."

"Huh!" Carl said, with a grin, "won't Jimmie be proud when he gets back to the Bowery and tells the boys there he was captured and held for ransom? Say, but this is turning out all right, after all!"

"It may not be so all right for Jimmie as you think!" growled Ben.

"Aw, they won't hurt that kid!" Carl put in. "Come, now, what do you think they captured him for? Honest? What for?"

"I'm afraid it is a part of the old game, begun near Penobscot Bay."

"Then the ball has opened down here!" Carl said, and turned away.

Havens, who had been making a careful inspection of the machines, to discover whether they had

been tampered with, joined Ben in front of the tent in a few moments, and at the same time Carl came running from a shallow canyon which he had started to enter. The boy was swinging something in his hand as he ran toward the two standing dejectedly in front of the small tent.

"The machines are in good condition," Havens began, then catching sight of the boy running toward him, he paused and asked:

"What's Carl found? Something that has excited him, I see."

"He can't have gone far to find it," Ben observed. "He was right here, in front of the tent, a minute or so ago. Why, he's got a paper!"

Carl now came running up and held out for the inspection of the others a square of brown wrapping paper about three inches in size.

"Look here!" he cried. "Just see what's on this paper!"

Havens took the slip into his hand and read the words written there in pencil. They were faintly drawn, but legible with close scrutiny.

"Look out!" "Keep away!" "Danger!"

"Well, now, what do you know about that!" exclaimed Ben, reading the warning words over Havens' shoulder. "'Look out—keep away—danger!'"

"I'll bet that Indian left it to scare us!" Carl

suggested. "He was a mighty foxy looking chap, with ugly eyes and a scar on his dirty chin!"

"There seems to be something more here," Havens said. "Down here in the corner there are letters which may mean other words. They are 'G.' and 'R.' Plainly written, too, but very small, as if purposely half concealed."

"That's the writer's signature!" Ben suggested. "I guess Laura Jean Libby isn't the only one who can write signed articles!"

"Cut out that alleged wit!" Ben commanded. "We're in a tight box, young fellow. We've got to find Jimmie! Understand that?"

"I don't think any little cracks like that will prevent us finding him," Carl grinned. "But there's something else there, in the corner."

"'From Bo—,'" Havens read, and then the writing ceased. There was a faint line running out from the "o," but it meant nothing, so far as the three could determine. Havens laid the paper carefully away.

"What's your idea?" asked Ben. "What does it mean? Who left it?"

"It hadn't lain long where I found it," Carl explained. "It must have been dropped this very morning. It was meant for us, of course?" he asked tentatively. "It must have been meant for us?"

Havens was thinking fast. Had the note been

left for the purpose of frightening them away, or had it been dropped by a friend who simply desired to warn them of impending danger? If the latter, who was that friend? How had he found his way there? Was it one he had met in some of his excursions abroad, or was it one who was merely showing humanity in warning a fellow human being of danger?

And Jimmie? Why had he been taken away? While the others argued as to the meaning of the initials and the half-formed word, Havens walked down to the canyon where the paper had been found and looked about, as if half expecting to find something which would explain the mystery.

There was very little soil on the surface of the rocks, but there was enough to show that Jimmie and the Indian had gone that way. The tracks of the two were occasionally distinctly observable. He followed on for a short distance, and then stopped to examine a footprint which did not seem exactly like those left by either the boy or the Indian.

The print was that of a common shoe, yet it was larger than any of the others. In fact, it seemed to have been made by a man of large size.

"Some one besides Jimmie and the Indian passed this way," concluded the aviator, "and that person, whoever he was, was keeping out of sight of the others, and was wearing European shoes with long nails in the heels."

This seemed to be all there was to be learned there, and Havens returned to the tent, where he found Ben and Carl still arguing over the initials and the half-finished word on the scrap of wrapping paper.

"Well, what do you make of it?" he asked, half amused at the different opinions expressed by the boys. "Was that note left there by a friend to warn us, or by an enemy to intimidate us?"

"By that Indian!" exclaimed Carl, looking scornfully at Ben.

"By a friend!" insisted Ben. "The Indian wouldn't have warned us to keep out of a country where our enemies seem to be having everything their own way, would he? They just stole Jimmie to get us into the mountain wilds! You'll see if I'm not right, in time!"

"Well, then, who's the friend?" demanded Carl. "Just tell us that."

"How should I know?" asked Ben. "I'm trying to think of the name of every one I know who ever talked of this country—who might be inclined to come down here. There's Charley—no, that isn't right!"

Carl jumped to his feet from the blanket where he had thrown himself and shouted so that the stragglers who were standing about the camp, at a respectful distance, started back, as if threatened with an attack!

"I know!" he cried. "Who was it that went south after we all backed out? Who was it that said he was going to Mexico to tip Diaz out of his long-hoarded office? Glenn Richards! That's who it was! Glenn Richards. 'G. R.' Don't you see? And that other means that he's from the good old Bowery! Guess I can't think a thing out. What?"

"For once, just for once," Ben laughed, "you've said something! It surely is Glenn Richards, but how did he come here, and why didn't he come right to the camp and tell us all about it? Why, if he was there this morning, he must know all about Jimmie's being carried off, and where he is at this minute! Glenn Richards! And the Bowery! Well, well!"

And so the boys in the camp and Jimmie, out in the falling flying machine, reached the same conclusion regarding the initials which had been brought to their notice. But with each one the mystery was unexplainable. Neither could imagine any reason for Glenn being there, or any reason for his not coming forward with due explanations if he was there.

"Perhaps he's a prisoner himself," suggested Carl.

"Then how would he get up so close to us?" demanded Ben, glad of an opportunity to, in turn, criticize his chum. "I guess if he was a prisoner he wouldn't be roaming around the country writing

warning notes to his friends, and not saying anything in the notes, at that. Not much!"

"We'll have to give it up," Havens interposed. "The first thing to do is to decide on some plan for helping Jimmie. The question as to whether this Glenn Richards is here or not will solve itself in time. By the way, is this Richards a large man, or a boy?"

"About seventeen," replied Ben. "Why do you ask that?"

"How about his feet? Large or small?" asked Havens, with a smile.

"Small!" both boys cried. "He's proud of his little feet," Ben added. "We used to laugh at him about them. Good old Glenn! I hope he is here. And, say, that boy can go some in the ring! Once he beat the head off——"

The explanation of what Glenn Richards had once done to an opponent in the prize ring was cut short by the approach of a greasy-looking native who asked if he could be of service as a guide. He spoke good English and wore a suit of clothes which might recently have come from Sixth avenue.

"A guide to where?" asked Ben, looking the fellow over and not liking his appearance at all. "Why should we want a guide? Nothing to see here but rocks, and we can have a look at them without a guide, I guess."

"I thought you sought the volcano," explained

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the native. "The other party sought the volcano. The other party camped at the volcano."

"Did they come in a flying machine?" asked Havens, eagerly.

The would-be guide nodded and pointed to the north.

"In a flying machine, and from there," he said, with a grin.

"Can you drive a machine?" asked Ben, in a sarcastic tone of voice.

He had acquired a dislike for the fellow, and would have turned him out of the camp instantly, only Havens seemed interested in him. Carl, Ben saw, shared the aversion he felt for the fellow.

"Si, Senor, I drive the machine!" was the unexpected answer.

"Where is the other machine now?" asked Havens, determined to learn everything he could from the fellow. "Where did you leave it?"

The would-be guide again pointed to the north, still showing his white teeth and trying to look very friendly and obliging."

"Back!" he said. "They went back in the machine, one, two days ago."

"And there is no flying machine in these parts now?" asked Ben.

"None, Senor. None! They flew away to the north."

"If this fellow tells the truth," Havens reasoned,

drawing the boys away from the little crowd which was coming closer to the tent every minute, "that settles the question about our friends, the enemy, being in these parts. He says the only machines that have been here flew to the north, after going to the volcano. But, can we believe him?"

"I don't!" Ben declared. "He looks like a snake to me!"

"I wouldn't believe him if he said he was hungry!" Carl exclaimed.

"Well," Havens finally decided, "we may as well keep him with us. If he is honest, which I doubt, he may be able to assist us, as he must know the mountains thoroughly; and if he is a treacherous knave, as I believe, we may as well keep him where we can see what he is up to."

So, against the advice of Ben and Carl, the fellow, who gave his name simply as Felix, was engaged to act as guide, and the machines were made ready for a trip over the mountains. Felix was permitted to take one of the aeroplanes out alone, so that his skill might be ascertained, and did so well on the test that he was given the *Ann* to drive, Ben going with him much to the latter's disgust.

Felix was not told that Jimmie had been carried off, but was merely informed that he had strayed away, and that they were looking for him. The guide explained that there were many caverns in the

mountains and that the chance of finding the boy from the flying machines was a slim one.

Ben questioned the fellow closely, as they skimmed the surface of the earth at low speed, regarding any other Americans who might be in the mountains, and was informed that there were no other "Gringos" in that section that he knew of. According to instructions given by Havens, the two aeroplanes did not travel together, but covered as wide a territory as possible in order that parallel canyons and ridges might be searched for Jimmie.

The two machines circled, it appeared to the boys, over every yard of the territory within five miles of the place where the camp had been made by the lake, but nothing of the missing boy was seen. Several times Havens thought he detected the sharp explosions of a gasoline engine, not that of the *Ann*, but his own motors were making so much noise that he could not be certain.

Ben, too, heard the explosions noticed by Havens, but, the two machines being some distance apart at the time, he naturally believed that the clamor came from the *Sarah*. If Jimmie, on the other machine, at that time, making for the volcano cliff, had not been so busy trying to keep his own aeroplane off the rocks he, too, would have heard the explosions of motors not attached to his own machine.

In an hour or two the *Sarah* and the *Ann* were, seemingly, miles apart for they were not in sight

from each other. There was a high ridge between them. Under the *Ann*, Ben saw, was a narrow valley with a small stream running through it. Here the guide swung downward, saying that he saw people moving about in the rocky passage.

The landing was made with difficulty, and Ben at once started off to investigate the place pointed out by Felix. He had scarcely reached the locality indicated when the whirr of the *Ann* attracted his attention.

Turning, he saw the machine in the air, whirling off to the north, in the direction of the city, and sailing low to keep out of sight of the *Sarah*, then, as has been said, some distance away.

Ben shouted, but to no purpose, and then turned to climb the steep ascent in order to signal to Havens, but, half way up, a rope was thrown over his shoulders and he was dragged into the wide mouth of a damp cavern.

CHAPTER XIII.

JIMMIE GETS A FISH SUPPER.

THE propellers of the aeroplane in which Jimmie and the guide were riding were still in motion, but were not revolving with sufficient force to keep it in the air. Had the boy been sufficiently familiar with the machine, he might, perhaps, have directed it to one of the lower ledges circling the peak, but he had had little experience in driving, and did not take advantage of the headway to accomplish a landing until the airship was dropping so swiftly that contact with a rocky surface would have proved fatal. Still, he clung desperately to the levers.

Finally, when instant death seemed certain, one of those freak occurrences which make aviation so uncertain, favoring life as well as death, brought, for a moment, new strength to the motors and fresh power to the propellers. The machine shot swiftly ahead.

Jimmie understood now that the fault was with the gasoline supply. The feeding apparatus had clogged when the power had dropped off. He knew,

too, that the obstruction, whatever it was, would be apt to again choke off the supply, so he struck off on a long slant for the bottom of the canyon, which seemed to him to be at least half a mile away.

His hope was that, somewhere in the gorge, a bit of soft, level earth might be found. If the wheels could find such a landing place he knew that they would carry the body of the machine swiftly along for a time and so break some of the force of the descent.

Far down, he saw that a recent breaking away of rock from above had dammed the rivulet he had observed, and for this he aimed. The motors ran slower in a moment, for the fuel feed was clogging again, and it was a question as to whether he could keep the machine on a forward motion until the pool of water was reached.

He did not know how deep the pool was, of course, but he knew that even a shallow pond would make a safer landing than a rocky surface.

As the aeroplane shot toward the pool, the guide lost every last bit of courage he possessed and clung frantically to the boy's arm. He gesticulated wildly with one free arm and shouted a rambling sentence into Jimmie's ear. The boy could not hear what he said, and, indeed, paid little attention to his ravings.

But one sentence, shouted over and over, finally

found an entrance into the lad's mentality and he took cognizance of it.

"The Devil's pool! The Devil's pool!" the guide shouted over and over again, pointing for an instant to the body of water below, and then trying frantically to seize the levers and turn the fast sinking aeroplane in another direction.

This action on the part of the frightened man lost Jimmie what little control he had of the machine, and it swayed frightfully. There was not sufficient headway to keep it in an upright position, so it dropped, the great wings beating the air like two giant flails.

Jimmie was tumbled out of his seat and went down, down, down. He half lost consciousness in that rapid descent, and his mind cleared only when he saw the pool only a few yards below. He was an expert swimmer and knew that he must not strike the water on his stomach or back.

He never knew whether it was because of his own frantic efforts to turn in the air, or whether chance turned his feet toward the surface of the pool. At any rate, whichever it was, the boy struck the water feet foremost and went down, down, as he has often sunk into the waters of the East river after a jump from some high pier at ebb tide!

Forever after that day, whenever he related the incident, the boy insisted that he descended five hundred feet! The water was ice cold, and he was

numb in every limb when he finally popped up to the surface.

Almost automatically he struck out, swimming toward a headland which jutted out into the pool. After a dozen strokes his feet touched the bottom, and his thought, even at that time, was that he had fallen into a pit in the pool, and that this had saved his life. Had he struck where the water was shallower, he would have been dashed into unconsciousness and, probably, never risen to the surface. This view of the case was confirmed by the sight of the body of the guide, which lay on the edge of the water, crushed into an almost unrecognizable mass.

The aeroplane was, apparently, a wreck, for it had fallen in the shallows on the edge of the pool. The boy, shivering from his cold bath, crept up on a ledge and fell down, unable, as it seemed to him, to move hand or foot. When he regained consciousness the sun was shining down upon him, so he knew that it must be about noon, as the sunlight would not reach that narrow canyon except when it was high up in the sky.

The warmth was grateful to his chilled frame, and he finally arose and walked about. On two sides ran the almost vertical walls of the deep canyon. To the east and west were the narrow openings through which the rivulet found its way, entering from the east and leaving from the western opening. Both walls were pierced, here and there,

with openings where the softer portions of the rocks had been washed away by the action of water. One of these was within reach only a few feet above the level of the pool, and into this the boy ventured cautiously.

It was pitch dark inside, and he had no means of making a light, but he pressed on, following the right wall with his fingers, and pushing one foot ahead to make certain that he was not stepping off into a chasm. The sunlight, falling on the further wall of the canyon back of him, was a comfort, and he frequently turned to look at that.

After he had proceeded some paces, hoping to come to some evidence of an opening above, he sensed the unmistakable odor of coal gas. He stopped and looked ahead, certain that the origin of the gas was not far away. It grew stronger when he advanced again, and presently the familiar flicker of a coal fire came into view, and a bent figure was passing before the flame, moving about as if at some constant task.

The weary boy's first impulse was to advance to the fire, but, on second thought, he decided to wait about for a time in order to learn, if possible, what kind of a reception he would be likely to receive. It was not at all improbable that he might meet some of the men who had opposed Havens on the coast of Maine, and who had procured his abduction.

Looking about for a resting place, he saw an

opening in the wall he had been following. In fact, there were numerous openings of this sort in the wall, the water with which the cavern had been flooded in past ages having torn out soft rock and left the portions which were harder to remove by erosion. However, he felt his way into the one at his right and threw himself down, determined to keep very wide awake, and to learn from his hiding-place just what sort of people were using the cavern.

But he was worn out with his exciting ride through the air, his sensational fall, and his deep plunge into the icy water, so in a moment he dozed off, his sleep being induced, in a measure, by the stupefying odor of coal gas, which seemed to be stronger in the little cavern than in the large one through which he had made his way.

He slept a long time, for when he awoke there was no sunlight on the walls of the canyon from which the cavern opened. If there had been no other means of determining the number of hours that had passed since the morning by the lake, the lad's stomach would have informed him that it was night. He had had no food since early in the morning, and was as hungry as a young bear.

The stink of coal gas still permeated the air of the close place, and the boy saw that the fire which doubtless produced it was still burning. Now there was no one to be seen at the fire, and so he moved toward it, very cautiously, for it was still possible

for him to retreat in case he detected a hostile presence in the cavern.

As he drew closer to the fire, another odor reached his nostrils. It was the very welcome odor of frying fish! Still there was no one in sight. The fire seemed to have burned down, for the flames now lit the cavern only when occasional flares touched the smoldering fuel.

The cavern ended at the back of the fire. The boy could see the fire shining on the stone wall. He could also see a heap of skins on the floor at the foot of the back wall, and a rough box stood close by. The place was evidently some one's home. But whose home?

Only for his stomach's urgings, Jimmie might have waited a short time before entering the circle of light about the fire, but his stomach autocratically ordered him to proceed and investigate the fish odor, so he advanced and stood by the blaze. There was no one in sight.

A skillet of fried fish stood on coals which had been raked a little to one side, and a carton of some sort of biscuits was not far away. The hungry boy seized the fish and the biscuits and retreated to his cavern. He still insists that that was the most satisfying meal of his life. As he ate in the semi-darkness the fire died lower and lower, and the call of wild beasts came from the entrance. They, too, he

thought, were longing for a fish supper! He hoped they would not enter in the hope of getting one!

It grew colder, too, for a strong wind swept into the cavern as the night advanced. His clothes were not yet entirely dry, and his teeth were soon chattering with the cold. He had noticed a heap of soft coal close by the fire, and finally decided to use it.

"If I don't build up that fire," he thought, "I'll freeze to death, and then the wild beasts will drop in and have a feast! The worst any one can do is to kill me, and that would be better than committing suicide by remaining here."

In accordance with this resolution, he moved to the fire and soon had it glowing and sending out coal gas at a terrific rate. Here was another problem. What did the occupant of the place do under such circumstances. He knew that no one could sleep there and live.

"Well," thought the boy, "I'll freeze to death if I go outside to sleep, so I may as well take chances on this luxurious bed chamber! Some one seems to live here, and perhaps the tenant will soon come and show me how to turn off the gas. It surely is fierce right now!"

Having thus decided to remain by the blaze for a time, until the person who had built the fire and cooked the fish arrived, the boy sat down on the heap of furs near the back wall and turned his

thoughts toward getting back to Havens and his chums. He had every reason to believe that he had traveled ten or fifteen miles in the flying machine, over peaks and canyons, and so the journey back, even if he did not lose his way in the tangle of ridges, would be both difficult and dangerous.

But, after a time, wink and pinch himself as he might, the lad closed his eyes, "just for a minute," because he found it impossible to keep them open! When he awoke the fire was still burning brightly, but there was no odor of coal gas in the cavern. Sitting up, for he had fallen back on the furs while he slept, the boy rubbed his eyes and looked about.

His eyes rested on a threatening and hideous figure sitting crouched on the other side of the fire. It was, apparently, the figure of a human being, yet so deformed that one, at first glance, might easily mistake it for some monstrous beast of prey which had taken on a slight semblance to humanity.

The hair was long and matted about a retreating forehead, the limbs, which were only partly covered, were twisted out of shape, the head was bent forward on the chest, while a great hump arose at the base of the neck, which was turned to one side, giving an odd, sinister look to the cadaverous face, lighted by large, set eyes, well back in the head, and glaring like those of a beast brought to bay. The figure sat motionless, the long, skinny arms encircling the twisted limbs.

Never for an instant did the threatening eyes leave the face of the boy, who, almost fascinated, as a bird is fascinated by the eyes of a serpent, sat looking back, almost incapable of motion!

CHAPTER XIV.

BEN COMES ACROSS A FRIEND.

IF a convulsion of the earth had leveled the tableland upon which the mountain peaks lifted, if the blue Pacific had risen to the tops of the highest elevations, Ben Whitcomb could not have been more astonished than he was at the moment the lasso shot out and fastened his arms to his sides! He had believed himself to be entirely alone in that desolate place. And, to heighten the mystery of it all, there was no person in sight—no one who might have thrown the lasso!

The boy's first move, after the momentary hesitation brought about by astonishment had passed away, was to reach for the knife he always carried in the right-hand pocket of his trousers. He could feel the bulk of it lying under his imprisoned hand, but could not get the hand into the pocket, twist and pull as he might. The greater his resistance the tighter the cord drew. The end of the cord which was out of sight located his captor in the cave he had been about to enter when the rope was thrown.

Ben struggled so hard, and the rope drew so tightly, that before long he found his arms and hands becoming numb with the loss of blood circulation. At length he gave up the unequal contest and sat down on the earth with his back against the rock at the mouth of the cavern.

"There, that's better!" came a boyish voice from the inside. "You'd have cut yourself into two pieces if you had kept on pulling. How do you think you feel?"

"Fine!" replied Ben, wondering at the good English and the unaccountable hiding. "If I felt any better I'd want to take something for it!"

"You've got your nerve!" came from the cavern, in a moment.

"I've got my manners, too!" Ben responded. "I'm not tying people up with ropes and making sport of them. Why don't you show yourself?"

"That isn't necessary!" was the reply, and Ben thought he detected a giggle between the words. "My appearance might not help you any!"

"Just you come out here and fight it out like a man!" Ben almost shouted in his anger. "I'd like to take one poke at you! You'd see!"

"That's what you said to Kid Murphy, the night he trimmed you down on Stanton street!" said the voice in the cavern, mockingly.

Ben arose to his feet and made a run for the opening to the dark chamber from which the imprisoning

rope came. The cord slacked under his feet as he advanced and finally tripped him so that he tumbled over on the hard floor.

"There!" cried the provoking voice. "I knew you'd get into a scrape. You always do. Who said you might come to Mexico, anyway? I didn't."

"Well, of all the nerve!" Ben began, angrily, then something in the voice suggested the night referred to—the night he met Kid Murphy in Stanton street, New York! Like a flash the truth came to him.

This must be Glenn Richards! Who else would know about that night on the lower East side? It could not be Jimmie, or Carl, so, he reasoned, it must be Glenn Richards, who had left for Mexico months before the departure of the *Sarah* and the *Ann*.

"You come on out here and take this rope off me, Glenn Richards!" Ben said, joy in his heart at the thought of release and companionship in that lonely place. "What did you go and throw it around me for, anyway, and what are you hiding for, and why don't you get out of this desolate land and back to the little old white way?"

Then a boy older and taller than Ben came rushing out of the cavern and fell upon Ben with hugs not unlike those of a grizzly!

"You old bandit!" he said to Ben. "Who would ever think of your being here? How's everybody

in New York, and who is the boss of the precinct, and where are you going, and what are you going to do when you get there? I'll ask the rest of my questions as soon as you have answered these, you old grouch!"

Ben looked at Glenn with a twinkle in his eyes as he slipped out of the rope. The boy did not look at all like the lad he had last seen on the Bowery. He was not so stout, but his every movement told of muscles hardened and brought to fullest development by hardy out-of-doors life and the daily climbing of mountains.

"Why did you throw that rope?" asked Ben, after familiar faces and scenes in New York had been discussed. "You might have choked me."

"Perhaps you think I can't throw a lasso!" Glenn answered. "The idea of my choking you—of getting it around your neck instead of your arms. I guess I would make a fine cowboy, after all this training with a rope!"

"But why did you throw it?" insisted Ben. "You're too handy with it it seems to me. Why didn't you just call out to me?"

Glenn laughed and patted the coiled rope in his hands.

"I'm practicing with it, and getting more expert every hour!" he said, with a humorous wink at Ben. "Why, when I lassoed Jimmie this morning I didn't

do half as good a job as I did with you. I struck him too low!"

"You lassoed Jimmie!"

Ben arose to his feet and looked at Glenn as if he could not believe the words he had heard him utter. "You lassoed Jimmie this morning?"

"Indeed I did!" cried Glenn, leaning back against the wall with a satisfied look on his brown, weather-tinted face. "You bet I did!"

"You're a dandy reception committee, where your friends are concerned," Ben flouted. "You ought to be on a desert island somewhere with that rope of yours! Where is Jimmie? What did you do with him?"

"I saw you looking for him," Glenn said, seemingly in no haste to clear up the strange situation. "I watched you from that ledge!"

"Why don't you answer?" demanded Ben, half angrily.

"Well," Glenn went on, "I turned him over to a man who wanted a likely young lad to run a flying machine for him. Jimmie didn't seem to like the assignment, but he had to do—just had to!"

"And where is he now?" asked Ben, indignantly.

"He's where no harm will come to him," was the reply.

"How do you know that? Why couldn't you have let him alone?"

"I'll tell you about that at another time," was the

answer. "You'll find Jimmie's all right! Now, why are you boys here, and who is that man with you? Pretty swell party, he seems to be. Must be rich!"

"I ought not to tell you a thing," Ben sulked, "until you tell me all about the game you're up to, but I will tell you that we're here under pay, and that the man you refer to, Mr. Havens, is rich, and is after more riches. He thinks there's gold down here. Perhaps you know whether there is or not? What about it? Have you seen any around here?"

"I have an idea that there is gold around here," was the hesitating reply. "To tell you the truth," he added, "that is why I am staying in this desolate land! I want to go back to New York rich!"

"Where do you think this gold is?" asked Ben, wondering if Glenn had been listening to tales of the gold-stocked crater. "Where are you looking for it? Are you making the search alone?"

Glenn laughed and began urging Ben along the ledge toward the summit of the rise. Once there he swept an arm over the country to the south and turned to his companion with a quizzical smile on his face.

"I'm looking for it there," he said, "in every cavern and in every peak. "I'll find it if I stay here for a thousand years!"

"Where are you going now?" asked Ben, as Glenn started along again.

"I'm going home," was the reply. "You see I had an aeroplane ride this morning, and the aviator had a fall and got injured, so we had to get another one. I got the job for Jimmie," with a provoking grin, "and that left me to walk back home."

"Why didn't you come to the camp and tell us why you wanted Jimmie?" asked Ben. "You've made us a lot of trouble. When will the boy be back?"

"I don't know," was the reply, "and I can't tell you why I didn't go to the camp and make myself known, or why I didn't let Jimmie see me. You boys will have to take my word that I'm not doing you any injury."

And this was all the boy would say about the incident of the morning. He declared that in time he would explain everything, and Ben had to be content with that. The two traveled fast, out and in canyons, up and down crags, until Ben was well-nigh exhausted.

"Why doesn't Jimmie come after us in the flying machine he is driving for that friend of yours?" asked the boy, after a time. "Or why doesn't the fellow who got me out of my machine and ran away with it come and get you? What do you know about that fellow, anyway?"

"Nothing," was the reply. "Nothing at all."

"I'll pay him out for that if I ever get to him!" Ben declared. "He's stolen the *Ann*, and now we'll

have a slow journey to where we are going, for we'll have to ride in phalanxes, two at a time."

While the boys stood on the top of a crag the popping of a gasoline motor reached their ears, and, looking up, they saw an aeroplane sailing across the sky. It was so far away that they could not see the faces of those occupying it, but Ben was certain that it was the *Sarah*, and that Havens and Carl were aboard. He shouted and swung his hat, but seemed unable to attract the attention of the riders, as the machine drove straight to the north and east, in the direction of the camp and the city.

"They will expect to find me there," Ben grumbled, "and here I've gone and lost the machine! I wish I had that fellow by the neck!"

"You mean the guide?" asked Glenn, with a grin.

"Of course. Who else should I mean?" with a snarl of anger.

"You may meet him before long," was all Glenn said, and, disgusted at his failure to attract the attention of Havens and Carl, Ben walked on by Glenn's side with a half scowl on his usually good-natured face.

The boys traveled all the afternoon, and at nightfall stopped to eat a luncheon of boiled meat and crackers which Glenn produced from a pocket of his coat. Ben seized the portion offered him eagerly.

"Why didn't you say you had something to eat?"

he laughed. "I'm half starved to death. How much farther have we to go, and have you got plenty to eat where we are going, and how soon can I get back to Havens?"

"You always were the human interrogation point?" laughed Glenn. "We will come into view of my palatial mansion in about half an hour," he added, "and then we'll get to it in about another hour. We are not far from it as the birds fly, but the land here is mostly standing up on end. See that pool down there? The one in the canyon?" pointing.

"Sure I do. Is that where you live? Didn't know you were a merman! What have you got to eat down there?" he added, with a chuckle.

"Fish," replied Glenn. "My chef is going to have a fish dinner for me, and he'll be angry at this delay, too. The fish will spoil."

"They can't spoil so as to escape me!" Ben asserted. "I'm starved."

"Well, that pool down there," Glenn went on, "is known as the Devil's Pool! The natives hereabouts are afraid of it. They say the waters are poisonous, that they are invitingly cool at the top and burning, blisteringly hot at the bottom. They believe that one once under its waters never comes to the top again. They avoid it as they would the plague."

"And that is why you make your home there?" asked Ben.

"Yes, that is the reason why I make my home there," was the reply. "I am rarely molested, except by Mexican pumas and beasts of the jaguar sort, who come to the pool to drink in comparative safety, as the natives are not there to shoot them."

"I'm afraid I'm doing wrong by going with you, right away from the camp," Ben said, as they hastened along. "They will think I have gone to join Jimmie! I don't know but I ought to go back, even now."

"You're too hungry, and too tired," laughed Glenn, "and, besides, you may learn something about Jimmie while you are with me! The little rascal! I wanted to grab him when I saw him leaving with the man who wanted an aviator!"

"Why didn't you let him know you were near?" demanded Ben. "Somehow, I don't seem to understand what sort of a game you are playing!"

"You'll know all about it in time!" Glenn promised.

"And you let Jimmie go off with that fellow without ever letting him know that you were near at hand!" exclaimed Ben, scornfully. "You didn't even let us know where he had gone!"

"But I left a warning for you," replied Glenn. "Of course you found it? I had to be pretty care-

ful in my movements about the time I was putting the paper where I thought you would discover it."

"What is the danger you warned us against?" demanded Ben.

"I can't tell you!"

"That's strange. Then what was the use of stirring us up with that warning, I should like to know? You're going daffy, I believe!"

Glenn would not defend himself, and so the lads clambered over another ridge, dropped down into a valley, swung around a bluff and came out where the rivulet cut through the hills to create Devil's Pool.

It was dark in the canyon and over the pool, though there would be a moon later. From the other side of the pool came the hungry snarl of a puma, and from the ledge above came an answering call.

"I hope they haven't got my supper," Glenn said. "They are not far away from my home. I wonder why my chef doesn't do some shooting?"

The boys passed along a very narrow ledge just above the creek's surface, and finally came out on the broader ledge which ran along in front of the cavern which Glenn called home.

Glenn stooped forward and peered in and then drew back in haste.

"It is dark in there," he said, "and there ought to be a light. Also, there is a chanking sound, where

it ought to be still! If that puma has devoured my chef there'll be trouble coming to him!"

Directly a great, lithe form shot past the boys and landed on the slope leading to the level of the pool.

"There he is!" shouted Glenn. "The puma got in, and he's been eating some one. Walk cautiously, now, for we're going in to see about it."

So the lads entered the cavern where Jimmie had sought shelter!

CHAPTER XV.

GLENN'S ALCOVE BEDROOM.

JIMMIE, sitting with his back to the wall, facing the monstrosity on the other side of the fire, began wondering if he would ever be permitted to leave the gruesome place. Anything seemed better than remaining there, under the staring eyes of the creature who was watching him so intently, so suspiciously. He had no weapons with him, for he had not counted on such an adventure on leaving the camp that morning.

Presently he made a move to one side, partly to discover what course the object across the fire would take, and partly to get closer to the entrance to the cavern. The creature, without moving his eyes from the boy's face, shifted so as to still remain between him and the way out.

"Look here, old chap," the boy finally demanded, "what's the game?"

If the guardian of the cavern understood the words he gave no inkling of having done so. The

cry of the puma in the canyon below came to the boy's ears more distinctly now.

"There's a new visitor just outside," Jimmie, whimsically, observed, as the cry rose to a shrill cat-like scream, "and he seems to be inviting his chums to a feast. You'd better turn your face and stand guard the other way."

The creature never moved, and Jimmie wondered if he would sit there with his back to the entrance and permit the beast to come in!

"Go it!" the boy added. "If you want to make a supper for that hungry beast you are at liberty to do so. He comes to you first, so I can stand it if you can!"

The boy's position was indeed a critical one. The creature sitting opposite him seemed to regard his presence there as more threatening than that of the puma! At last, when a movement at the mouth of the cave indicated that the beast was actually entering, the boy seized a piece of half consumed coal from the fire and hurled it toward the opening in front.

The coal burned his fingers, but that did not prevent his renewing the attack. He repeated the effort several times, and at last stirred the creature in front of him to action. At first what the fellow did seemed threatening, but a conciliatory motion satisfied the boy that the common peril had at last

caused his guard to look upon his presence there as the least of two pressing evils.

What the fellow did was to lift himself on his crooked legs until he was in a half upright position and advance around the fire with his hands extended to show that he intended no harm. Jimmie stepped aside as the other approached and watched him pulling at the skins of wild beasts which had formed his seat.

To his amazement the removal of the skins revealed an aperture in the back of the wall against which he had been sitting. The creature inserted a clawlike hand into the aperture and slowly swung the rock to the left of it into an unknown nook beyond. The opening thus revealed was sufficiently large to admit the passage of a man in a creeping position, and the creature motioned the boy inside.

The puma was now approaching the fire again, as Jimmie knew by the clatter of his claws on the rocky floor. Only for the fire, he knew, the beast would have sprung upon them long before.

Jimmie motioned to the other to enter first, and he did so, after throwing the furs in, to be immediately followed by the youngster, who now believed it safe, as the other would not have protected him from the puma if he had sought his life. Once through the narrow opening, Jimmie found himself in darkness. The place was quite large, for he could

not feel the body of the other touching him, as if crowded for space.

Both the floor and the walls seemed to be covered with furs, and the boy began to see where the occupant of the cavern hid away from any danger which threatened him. After feeling about to see that there was no danger of dropping off into a vault in the rock, Jimmie threw himself down on the fur and peered through the thin aperture which had been left after the rock had been rolled back into its door-like position.

At first he could see only the fire from where he lay. Then a moving body came into view, approaching the rear wall with crouching, cat-like steps. The puma had entered the cavern and was sniffing about to ascertain where the supper had gone which he had counted on.

"Look here!" Jimmie cried, pulling at the other's arm, "that beast will stand guard there forever! The fire will go out, and he'll call in others to watch when he wants to get out for a little exercise! We're safe for the present, but we'll be pretty hungry before he gets tired of waiting for a meal of Gringo. We're in for it, old chap!"

The fire died down, and the puma came and sniffed at the aperture through which the boy was looking. The creature who had introduced him to this novel refuge, scornful of danger, flattened out and went to

sleep. At least the boy thought so because of the snores which came from his ugly mouth.

Presently the fire died out entirely, and then Jimmie could hear the great cat tearing at the box which stood near the wall. From the crunching which followed he decided that the box had contained the cave-dweller's supply of fresh meat.

"This is a fine, large country!" Jimmie thought, "and yet I seem to be getting only a little bit of it! I wish I could put poison on the meat that brute is eating. I'd like his hide!"

After a long time, occupied by Jimmie in estimating the duration of it, the other occupant of the space roused from his sleep and the boy knew by his crowding against him that he was listening at the crack in the wall. He listened, too, and heard, instead of the growls of the puma, the sound of a voice speaking in English!

"Go it!" he muttered. "The robber who was killed said the water out there was the Devil's Pool, and I guess this must be the Devil's Cave. I guess I'll wake up, after a while, if I'm good!"

But that it was no dream the lad soon understood, for there came a clattering of claws on the rock, as if the puma was springing away, and then the sound of voices again, boyish voices, which caused Jimmie to push hard against the creature who guarded the entrance to the smaller chamber in an attempt to get out. Surely, he thought, that was Ben's voice, but

with whom was he talking, and how had he found his way to that place?

"Just as I feared," Jimmie heard a voice saying, "the brute has devoured my fish dinner!" wait until I light a torch, and we'll see!"

Jimmie chuckled as he thought of the enjoyment he had taken over the meal the puma was now being accused of stealing!

"And he's demolished my cold storage warehouse, too," the voice went on, as a light flared up, and Jimmie heard the fragments of the box which had contained the fresh meat being kicked about the cavern. "I reckon my chef got out of the way of the great brute!

"Now, I presume, I'll have to go down to the Devil's Pool and get fish for supper. I feel in the need of a square meal right now, but it won't take long to spear the fish, as they come to the shore in schools when a light shows on the bank. Want to go with me and see the fun? It is only a step, as you know."

"And that puma out there!" Ben's voice exclaimed. "Not for mine! I'll rest up while you are getting the fish. Say, I wish Jimmie could be here to partake of the fish dinner. I presume it has been a long time since he has had a genuine fish dinner—from fresh fish!"

Jimmie held his sides to prevent his laughter being heard outside. He knew now that the first speaker

was Glenn Richards, and was much amused at the thought that it had been a long time between fish dinners for him! Why, he could taste the fish yet—Glenn's supper!"

Jimmie thought he would like to take a hand in the fishing, and so get out of his cramped position, so he let out a succession of growls and snarls, and crows, and screams which caused the creature who had let him into the little cavern to push the rock aside and roll out on the floor, where he sat up and pointed in alarm to the place he had left.

"There's something in there!" Glenn declared. "I'll see what it is before I go fishing. Can't be anything very fierce, or Dodo wouldn't be alive now. Look at the fellow turning flip-flops from sheer fright!"

Ben at first regarded the creature who had so suddenly rolled out of what had seemed a solid wall as a wild animal, then he detected human features, then he leaned back and laughed at the odd antics of the fellow.

"That's my chef," Glenn explained. "He keeps house for me when I go off on my gold-hunting trips. What is it, Dodo?" he asked of the creature which was squirming on the floor.

Dodo pointed to the little cavern and made a hideous face, if it were possible to make his natural features look worse by contorting them. The wild animal sounds continued to come through the small

aperture, and Ben took the torch from Glenn's hand and advanced toward it. Then he stopped and turned toward Glenn, with a grin on his face.

"Say, he asked, "why didn't you tell me that Jimmie was here?"

"Jimmie here?" asked the bewildered Glenn.
"Jimmie isn't here!"

"I suppose it is some mucker from the subway excavation making that barnyard demonstration!" said Ben, sarcastically, as Jimmie let out a shrill crow and flapped his arms to his sides. "That's Jimmie, all right, and you know it! Come out of that!"

Jimmie came rolling out of the niche and was immediately seized by the boys and tumbled about the cavern until all were out of breath.

"Where have you been?" demanded Ben, then.

"I've been dreaming the happy hours away in this man's alcove bedroom," replied the boy, rubbing the shoulder which Ben had been thumping. "I was coming out in twenty years with my dog Snyder," he added, with a grin which wrinkled his nose.

"How did you get here?" asked Glenn. "It is a wonder Dodo didn't eat you! He's fierce, that boy is!"

"So's a sheep!" Jimmie laughed. "He can look wicked, but he's an angel of peace and mercy. He opened up the alcove bedroom when the puma came in here to order raw boy for supper. Say, but isn't

this Dodo, as you call him, a prize beauty? I'm in love with his shape!"

"He had a fall from a cliff years ago," Glenn explained, "and came out of it looking like that. He's faithful, and a good cook, so I let him live with me. But I have never known him to let a fish supper go to a beast before," he added.

Jimmie laughed until the cavern echoed with the sound of his boyish merriment. The others looked on, slowly arriving at the truth regarding the missing fish. Dodo sat upright and pointed at Jimmie.

"Don't you ever say again that a beast got those fish!" Jimmie cried. "Say, but they were fine! Let us go and get more! I could eat a peck, right now. Come along, Ben. Glenn can tell us how he came to take up his residence in this voting precinct later on!"

"So you ate my fish!" Glenn laughed. "When did you get here, and how did you know you would be welcome? I think you've got a nerve, to eat my dinner and take possession of my alcove bed chamber!"

Ben looked from boy to boy with a puzzled face.

"You don't mean to say you didn't know Jimmie was here?" he asked of Glenn, but that young man only laughed and winked at Jimmie!

"I knew it!" cried Ben. "That's why you wouldn't tell me what you did with Jimmie when you lassoed him this morning."

“You did!” roared Jimmie. “You lassoed me this morning! Now, what did you go and do that for? I might have been killed. The man who rode with me lies dead on the rocks now, and the flying machine is a wreck.”

Then, of course, the stories of the adventures of the day had to be told, and a fire built, and new torches procured, and fish caught for supper, and then all three boys, after eating, nodded sleepily, and in the end crept into what Jimmie called the alcove bedroom and went to sleep, with Dodo watching on the outside.

And in the night a strange thing came to Devil's Pool!

CHAPTER XVI.

PURSUED BY MEXICAN LAW.

HAVENS and Carl proceeded a long way south, that morning, searching, so far as was possible, every canyon and peak for the missing Jimmie, who was, as the reader knows, about that time lying unconscious on the ledge, recovering from the shock of his cold bath in Devil's Pool.

After a time they noticed that they were not keeping very close to the *Ann*, in which Ben and the alleged guide had left the camp, so they swung around in a circle and looked for the truant airship. Much to their surprise, the *Ann* was nowhere to be seen.

It will be remembered that Felix, the man who had been employed as guide, landed Ben on a mountain-side quite early in the morning and flew away without him. After getting possession of the machine, Felix had landed in a canyon not far away and remained there until afternoon and then struck west, which accouts for the fact that the airship was not seen by the two who were searching for it.

"I'm afraid something has happened to Ben," Carl said, after the search had extended over an hour. "I guess that guide got him!"

Havens, although anxious, could not believe that the guide had proved unworthy of his trust. Instead, he became obsessed with the idea that some accident had happened to the *Ann*."

"The *Ann* may be in the camp, crippled," he said, hardly believing in the opinion he expressed. "At any rate, we may as well go back and find out."

It was when they were sailing back to the camp by the lake that Ben tried to signal them from the crag. They found the camping place of the night before in full possession of a horde of natives and loafers from the city. Nothing of value except the oiled silk tent and a few cooking utensils had been left by them in the morning, but these had disappeared.

"We'll have to get away into the mountains," Havens concluded, as he drove inquisitive natives away from the *Sarah*. "We shall be robbed of our machines if we remain here! That will necessitate buying more supplies, so you go up into the city and bring back all you can carry. Luckily the gasoline bought this morning is still here, and I'll fill the tanks. Wonder they didn't steal that too. I'll remain here and guard the machine while you are gone, then we'll be off for the hill places."

"But Ben and Jimmie may come back here," sug-

gested Carl. "If they should come they would never be able to find us."

"We might show ourselves in the air about this place every day," the aviator replied, "and we'll have to buy supplies here, too, for we can't carry enough to last us any length of time. When we land again we'll get closer to the city, if we can find a suitable place—I mean, of course, when we land in this vicinity. Now, get back as soon as possible."

So Carl hurried away to buy tinned goods, cooking utensils, and corn and oatmeal, which the boys made into pancakes when opportunity offered, and Havens busied himself oiling and inspecting the machine. The loungers gathered closer around the machine when they saw that it was guarded by only one man, but Havens threatened them with his automatic revolver, and they soon learned to keep at a respectful distance.

Carl was gone a long time, and when he came back he was out of breath and excited. He at once dropped his purchases on the ground and began arranging them on the *Sarah*, packing and tying them on as he had seen Havens do. The aviator watched him quietly with a smile on his face.

"You must have met with an adventure up there," he finally said.

"Oh, you're there, are you?" exclaimed Carl. "I didn't see you when I came up, as you were under the planes, so I got to work. We must get out of

this right away, if we don't want to be put into jail!"

"That's cheerful news!" laughed Havens. "What about it?"

"Well," Carl explained, "there's an aviator up in the city, at a dirty little hospital, with a broken leg and a bandaged head. I heard about him the first thing, and went up to see him, thinking it might be Ben or Felix. But it was a stranger. And what do you think?"

"I think he might have taken a tumble!" replied Havens. "That right?"

"Of course that's the answer," Carl replied. "I asked him where he came from, and he said I knew well enough! What do you think of that?"

"What's the answer to that?" asked Havens, thoroughly interested.

"Why, he is telling the natives and the officers that he belonged to our party, and that we conspired to throw him out and leave him in the hills to die!"

"But what's the object?" asked Havens.

Then he stopped and began packing the supplies on the machine.

"I see!" he said. "He wants to provide us with comfortable quarters in the jail here! I presume the officers are after warrants now?"

"You know it!" Carl answered. "And they're coming now!" he added, as a group of men drew nearer to the machine. "We'll have to jump for it."

"Rather clever!" Havens mused, as the two mounted the machine and set the motors in motion. "Quite a clever scheme to get us out of the way while they search the craters for the gold! Here we go!"

The *Sarah*, when she took the air, was only about three yards ahead of a couple of men who were rushing toward her, waving official-looking papers in their hands as they ran. One of them even sprang at the underwork of the aeroplane as it left the ground, so eager was he to serve the warrants which had been issued for Havens and his party.

"Good-bye, old town!" Carl shouted back, shaking his clenched fist at the crowd of loungers, "we'll return when Uncle Sam takes possession of your greasy little republic!"

Havens was thoughtful for a long time after getting the *Sarah* into the air. At first he did not know what course to pursue. He drove the machine in circles, looking into the city as he did so, and seeing that crowds were forming in the streets. Then he shot away, traveling at a slow pace so that conversation might be engaged in.

"Is that aviator a Mexican?" he finally asked of Carl.

The boy shook his head as he swung a defiant arm at the town.

"He is an American," he said, "and I believe the smash his head shows came from a stone in the

hands of a perfectly capable baseball player, the same having been delivered up on the coast of Maine!"

"Well," Havens said, "whether it is or not, his presence here shows that there is at least one more flying machine in this vicinity, and we don't have to guess many times to make up our minds what it is here for."

"Then, if that is true, we won't be safe from those Mexican officers even in the air!" exclaimed Carl. "And I'll bet an apple that they've captured Ben and Jimmie already! This is what the fellow who left the paper was warning us against, don't you think?"

"It might have been," replied Havens, thoughtfully. "Now," he went on, "there was some talk about a certain Glenn Richards. You say he left New York for Mexico some months ago. The initials found on the warning paper were the same as his. If he is here, and sought to warn us, why wouldn't he come to us in person, being so close by, and not adopt the mysterious course he did adopt?"

"That is what has been puzzling me," Carl answered. "I believe that Richards was close to our camp this morning, that he knew we were in danger, and that he tried to warn us, still, I can't understand why he took such a mysterious way of doing it."

There was more talk along this line, and then Havens, as if he had at last reached a decision as to the right course to pursue, struck off to the south

at a high rate of speed. Carl looked inquisitive, but made no comment. Finally Havens slowed down again and explained.

"Ben and Jimmie may have come across Richards," he said. "It seems likely that Richards would hang about on the chance of meeting them, doesn't it? Well, if he has come upon them, they will be safe. Now, when they discover that we have deserted the camp by the lake for good, they will understand that we have gone to the point of importance—to the vicinity of the crater believed to have thrown up gold."

"But they don't know where that is!" urged Carl.

"I don't know myself!" smiled Havens. "Still we can all guess. We know that this crater is never quite cold, that thin spirals of smoke or steam continually rise above it. We'll find such a place—where there are vapors over a seemingly extinct crater—and look out for them. It seems that there are several such peaks near Colima, which you see off to the south, and so we will go to that section and look about."

After running in a southerly direction for some time, Havens turned west and shot out toward the Pacific at a swift pace. To the right, lay the lower ridges of the Sierra Madre mountains, pushed up above the high tableland. To the left lifted the white peaks of Nevada de Colima, not the volcano, but

another mountain nearly fifteen thousand feet in height. Straight ahead the tableland began a gradual slope, broken by occasional lifts, toward the Pacific coast. Below, the country was wild and broken, only now and then a bit of grazing land showing.

"The streamers of smoke or steam we are looking for," Carl said, as the *Sarah* shot out to the west, "are on the left. We are passing them."

"That's the idea," Havens replied. "I want to come into the section we seek from the southwest, so that our machine will not be seen from the north and east. We'll sail low over there and keep behind the summits, for if the other machine, the one the aviator fell out of, is in good condition we shall be followed by the officers."

"Have you give up looking for Ben and Jimmie?" demanded Carl.

"Not at all!" replied Havens. "I'm going to a place where we stand a good chance of meeting them. As I said before, they will understand where we are. The place to hunt for the lads is the place where we all agreed to meet if anything went wrong."

"And where others are looking, too!" cried Carl, pointing.

Havens followed the pointing finger and saw an aeroplane swinging toward them from the west. It was dipping unsteadily, and seemed to be in charge

of an incompetent aviator. Havens swung out to meet it.

"That is about the way Ben would operate a machine, if he was doing it alone!" cried Carl, hopeful that the lost boy had at last been discovered. "Perhaps he had tumbled Felix out, and is coming to meet us."

"That certainly is the *Ann*!" Havens shouted. "I know the motions of the old bird! But that is not Ben driving her!"

Carl got out his glass and looked long at the advancing machine.

"It looks like Felix," he finally said. "Perhaps he has met with an accident, and is making for camp!"

Havens took the glass and inspected the oncoming airship critically.

"It surely is the *Ann*," he finally declared, "and that is Felix running her. Now, where is Ben? They went away together."

"The answer is over there!" Carl suggested, grimly, and Havens put on every ounce of power the motors commanded and headed for the machine, sailing leisurely out of the west.

In a moment the *Ann* whirled and started back to the west, going at full speed. Instead of wobbling now, the machine darted off like a bird on the wing. Carl clutched Havens' arm and shouted in his ear:

"She is running away from us! She is heading

for the ocean! Now, which is the better machine in a race in the air, the *Sarah* or the *Ann*?"

"That is an open question," Havens shouted back.

"Go it, then!" cried the boy. "We'll soon know which is the best racer. I really believe we are gaining on her already."

But the distance between the racing aeroplanes did not appreciably decrease for two hours. During this time there came periods when the drivers could see each other's faces plainly, and then they swung apart again, to close up and drift apart once more, just as the currents of air favored or retarded the motion. It was an exciting ride. The valleys and canyons raced below like landscape in a moving picture.

Presently a long steady, beating roar came up, and then they saw the Pacific below!

CHAPTER XVII.

JIMMIE FINDS A "KITTEN."

BEN was the first one to awake, that night, in what Glenn called his "alcove bedroom," the cavity in the rock back of the fire. It was a roaring, hissing, popping sound which brought him out of dream-land, but when he opened his eyes wide, with some understanding of what was going on around him, he heard Dodo uttering wild, half inarticulate cries of fright.

Ben crawled over Jimmie and Glenn and emerged from the little cavern to see a bright fire burning in the outer chamber and Dodo rolling on the floor in front of it. His first impression was that the native had been attacked and wounded, still there was no blood in view, not a sign of a struggle, anywhere. Dodo sprang up when he saw Ben and motioned him toward the entrance, which, as will be remembered, looked out on Devil's Pool. Ben walked forward as desired and looked out.

It was no longer a quiet mountain pool. The moonlight no longer lay over a scene of peace and

beauty. The pool was one steaming, boiling mass! Ben shrank back from the hot breath of it.

The steam from the pool was slowly filling the cavern. Now and then, when the wind swept the vapor away, Ben could see that the boiling, bubbling waters were rising. It would be only a question of time when they would reach the level of the cavern and flood it.

Ben had noticed, during the fishing trip to the Pool, that the barrier which held the water from the channel below was much higher than the surface of the water itself. He now remembered that it was some ten feet higher, and that the floor of the cavern was only about five feet above the level of the surface as it stood during the afternoon.

While Ben stood watching the odd sight, Dodo ran out to the entrance of the cavern, dropped on his knees, threw his hands aloft and began an incantation of which nothing was intelligible to Ben save the gestures. While he watched the superstitious native trying to drive the boiling waters back by a purely mental process, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and, turning around, saw Glenn's smiling face.

"What does it mean?" asked Ben, astonished to see how little the wonderful thing excited his friend. "What makes the water boil?"

Glenn did not reply to this question instantly.

Instead, he pointed to the kneeling, gesticulating Dodo and explained:

"He is ordering his god to put out the fire."

"From what I can see of the procession," said Ben, "I should judge that his god is not obeying orders. But what is it that makes the water act in that way? Strangest thing I ever saw!"

"Do you mean what makes the water boil?" asked Glenn. "Why that is the Devil's Pool, and the water is due to boil every month or so."

"But why, and how, and how long?" demanded Ben.

"One at a time!" Glenn requested. "First, why: The water boils because it is hot! It is hot because there is a crater under it which fills with lava now and then, displacing the water and throwing it out in the form of steam. How? The crater is an offshoot from a large one not far away from here, and the burning lava enters it only when the large one is full up to a certain point. See? How long? Well, one can hardly tell. The lake may be calm and cold again in a week. It may not get back to normal in two weeks."

"You're going to be flooded out of your home," Ben observed.

"Of course! But there's a cavern higher up that I move my property into at such times. I'll show you when it comes time to move."

"What do you think, now, of Glenn's steam-

heated suite of rooms?" demanded Jimmie, creeping out of the alcove bedroom. "Fine, eh?"

"This would be a nice place to run a bath house!" Ben observed.

"We'll have to be moving," Glenn warned, in a moment. "Come along and I'll show you the second story of my furnished flat."

When the lads entered the cavern Glenn reached into one of the cavities which pierced the sides between the doorway and the rear wall and brought out a ladder, built of saplings tied together with twine.

"This ladder looks like a cheap thing," the boy laughed, turning his face to the back of the place in order to escape the hot steam which was now pouring in, "but it is anything but that. I carried these little trees a long way! They don't grow about my brownstone home!"

"Get your elevator to working!" Jimmie advised, "for it is getting nice and pleasant here—like the back end of a Chinese laundry on Pell street! Hurry up! I'm choking!"

Glenn set the ladder against the west wall and mounted slowly on the rungs until he came to an opening in the roof of the cavern. Then he disappeared from sight for a moment.

"He's got a second story, all right," Jimmie exclaimed. "Wonder I didn't see that private staircase!"

Glenn's ruddy face now looked down out of the opening above.

"Come along," he said. "One at a time, and bring up the furs and kitchen stuff. Don't break my elevator!"

The boys collected the furs and utensils and passed them up. They found the room above almost a duplicate of the one below, only it was larger. It, too, looked out on Devil Pool, but was so high above it that no water could reach the floor.

The place was now lighted by torches made of tough fibers soaked in oil. Ben threw himself down on a skin and sniffed the air.

"Where do the smoke and coal gas from below go to?" he asked.

Glenn moved a sheet of galvanized iron from the west wall, disclosing a narrow, chimney-like place which seemed to lead to the surface of the sloping mountain outside. He seemed proud of the arrangement.

"That's my ventilator!" he laughed. "It will clear the air in the room below in no time at all. When I go away, I usually close it, so the column of smoke can't be seen at a distance. When the gas and smoke find their way out of the mouth, it doesn't make such a show as this chimney does, compressing the smoke and sending it up into the air like a signal of distress. The alcove is ventilated in the same way. I brought the iron guards from the city!"

"I wondered why the cave was full of gas one minute and clear of it the next," Jimmie said. "If you'll move this apartment house to Stanton street, you can get big money for it!"

"Aw, you think there's no value in anything unless it is in little old New York!" grinned Glenn. "Well, I wouldn't mind being there now!"

Ben walked to the entrance and looked out on Devil's Pool.

"Almost full!" he commented, "and Dodo is getting in his work in fine shape! I should think he'd get tired of that!"

"He never does," Glenn replied. "He thinks the Old Nick comes to the pool and stirs it up with a redhot iron!"

"No wonder this old mountain is full of caves!" Jimmie cried. "Think of lava pouring into great masses of cold water! The whole thing ought to blow up! How far is the active crater from here?" he added.

"There is a little crater about one thousand feet up, on the other side of the mountain," was the reply, "but this is active only at certain seasons of the year. De Colima, the big one, is quite a distance away, and over on a range connected with this one only by low ledges."

"But the two are connected away down under the surface?"

"I think so, especially as this little one gets into

business whenever Colima gets busy. There are probably natural tunnels in the earth connecting the two."

Ben looked at Jimmie knowingly. Each was thinking of the crater Havens had come to find—a crater which became active only on certain occasions. Perhaps they had blundered on it!

"There'll be plenty of cooked fish down there," was Jimmie's comment as he looked down on the steaming, bubbling lake, now growing rapidly.

"Don't you ever forget that they know enough to swim up stream when trouble begins," Glenn answered.

"They must have to swim a long way when it gets hot in the pool," Jimmie commented. "No wonder the natives call this Devil Pool."

The boys sat for a long time at the mouth of the cavern looking over the bubbling pool! Daylight came presently, and Glenn remembered that he had not rescued the unconsumed fish of the night before from the lower cavern. There were tinned goods and meal which he had brought from the city—payment having been made in puma hides—but the boys decided to have fish for breakfast.

Glenn took Jimmie to the entrance and showed him a fragile ledge running away to the east, winding around the elevation, but fairly safe.

"If you follow this," he said, "you will cross a little divide and come out on the rivulet above the

falls. The hot water never gets over the falls, but the fish do, in some way which I do not understand."

"I've seen 'em jump falls six feet high," remarked Jimmie.

"Well, anyway, there are plenty of fish up there, in a pool above the falls. Take my fishing outfit and bring some down while I make pancakes for breakfast. And look out for the puma which paid us a duty call last night. I suspect it to be a mother, so the cub will be close by."

Jimmie went away whistling and soon came to the cold pool. There were, as Glenn had said, plenty of fish there, so he had little difficulty in catching a good supply. As he was turning back his attention was attracted by a mewling appeal in the distance.

"Now, how came a kitten here?" he asked himself, laying his fish down and advancing up a small canyon which led off from the ledge he had been following. "Guess Glenn's got one he forgot to introduce!"

Half a dozen paces up the canyon he heard the sounds more distinctly, and turned in at a shallow break in the wall. A creature having the friendly manners of a kitten came out to meet him. It was about a foot in length, with thick, close fur.

The color along the back was reddish brown, set off by three rows of small spots which were darker. The sides were reddish-white, the belly and breast

almost entirely white. The tail was long and was curled up like that of a cat.

The animal advanced toward Jimmie with a little purring sound which did not appear to be so kittenish at close quarters. The boy lifted it in his arms and started back to where he had left the fish.

Five minutes later he was seen by Glenn and Ben making for the cave at full speed, minus fish, but carrying a young animal which clung to his right shoulder and yowled frantically as it looked backward. The lad seemed to be making jumps a rod long. From behind, rang out a roar which was fit to chill the blood in one's veins.

The boy bounded into the cave and seized Glenn's revolver.

"That yellow thing chased me," he cried. "I found this kitten out there and rescued it, and the puma wanted to eat me instead of the cat."

"Put it down!" ordered Glenn. "Put it down where it can run back."

"If this isn't your kitten," Jimmie insisted, "it is mine, and I'm going to keep it. Ever see one like it before, Ben?"

Ben never had, and said so, and while the two bent over the kitten, rubbing its head and affectionately pulling its tail, Glenn took the revolver and stood at the doorway! The puma was coming nearer.

"Now," Glenn said, directly, as the howls of the

beast grew quiet, "if you'll put that baby here where it can run to the puma, we shall get along without furnishing a breakfast for the beast."

"Give my kitten to the puma!" roared Jimmie. "I guess not!"

"Kitten!" shouted Glenn. "That's a young puma, I tell you, and the mother will be in this cavern in a minute if you don't put it out, and she will be sure to get one of us! Put it out!"

"I say it is a kittie!" Jimmie declared. "Ben says it is, too!"

Glenn seized the kitten and laid it in the doorway. The mother was already there, crouching for a spring.

The baby puma, instead of going out to meet its mother, backed into the cavern, and the boys pressed their backs close against the wall. The question of the moment was this:

Would the puma take the kitten in her mouth and march off with it, or would she spring into the cavern and seize one of the boys?

Ben leaned forward with the intention of pushing the kitten out to the ledge in front, where the puma crouched, but Glenn warned him away.

"She'll jump if you go an inch nearer!" he said, and Ben drew back.

The kitten continued to crawl back for a moment and then innocently rolled over on its brown back, exposing a white patch of fur between its legs, and pro-

ceeded to play with its paws. Glenn groaned aloud.

"She'll come in here now," he said. "If I had a torch I might drive her away, but they are all at the back of the room."

"Shoot her!" advised Ben.

"If I do," Glenn answered, "I shall have to make sure to kill her the first shot or she will tear one of us to pieces. Listen! There's another."

The remark was justified by a scream which came from the ledge farther to the east. Another puma was approaching to take a hand—or a paw!—in the threatened engagement!

"They'll both stay there all day," groaned Glenn, "unless we find some way of getting that kitten out. There may be others about, too."

"I got you into this mess," Jimmie whispered, "and I'll take a chance on going back there after some torches. If there are two it is of no use to open fire on them."

"Wait!" Ben cried. "Look out there in the sky!"

What they saw was a flying machine coming from the north, flying low down so that it was plainly seen from the entrance to the cavern.

"That may be the *Sarah*!" shouted Jimmie. "If it is, Havens will soon teach this beast a lesson!"

"And it may be the *Ann*, driven by the guide who dumped me out!" Ben observed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A RACE IN THE AIR.

"I DON'T like this familiarity with the ocean," Carl shouted in Havens' ear, as the *Ann*, closely followed by the *Sarah*, dashed out over the troubled waters of the Pacific. "A dump here wouldn't be pleasant."

"We are as safe as he is!" Havens replied. "He is taking to the ocean because he thinks we won't follow him."

"He'll find out that we're game!" Carl replied, with a grim smile.

It was hard talking in the rush of air against the speakers, and in the constant, insistent clamor of the motors, so nothing more was said at that time. Havens and Carl were too busy observing the *Ann* to want to do much talking. The driver, Felix, he had called himself, certainly was making desperate efforts to get away from the *Sarah*.

Now he shot out over the blue expanse for miles, traveling as the aeroplane had never traveled before. Now he slanted up, up, up, into the sky above until

the chill upper air caused him to turn back. Now he dropped almost to the surface of the ocean, until the curling waves sent showers of foamy spray to meet him!

But always the *Sarah* clung to her heels! It was not necessary for the *Sarah* to go as high as the *Ann* went. It was not necessary for her to drop down until her wings sparkled with the salt spray. It was not necessary to shoot out so far as the *Ann* went. But always the pursuing aeroplane stood between the *Ann* and the shore!

"Unless I'm much mistaken," Havens said, as he brought the *Sarah* to a lower level as the *Ann* scooted almost to the waves, "that fellow will soon need gasoline. I don't believe he has filled his tanks since this morning. We'll lay off and on until we get him."

"If he's hurt Ben," Carl observed, "it won't be necessary for us to take him back for trial, will it?"

Havens did not answer the question, but there was a tightening of the lips which the boy understood! That race in the air would have drawn applause from any audience under the sun! Now up the coast, now down, now out, now in, the *Ann* wheeled. Always the *Sarah* shut her out of a spot where she might land! Felix shook his fist and gave voice to words which could not be heard by those on the *Sarah*.

At last the treacherous guide saw that the *Sarah*

would always meet his efforts to gain the shore. Doubtless regretting his foolish effort to run away by flying over the sea, he drew a revolver and fired at the driver of the pursuing machine. The song of the bullet was heard, but there was no damage done. Havens did not resort to the same tactics. He kept a little farther away, but he still waited!

There are holes and currents in the air just as there are holes and currents in the seas. Every aviator of experience knows that he is liable at almost any minute to drop off an invisible precipice into a hole in the air, or to meet a countercurrent which will twist his planes as if they had come into a cyclone. It was one of these unseeable holes in the air that brought the race to an abrupt termination.

Felix, evidently resolving to make a fight to get above dry land, shot toward the coast with a revolver in his hand. His idea probably was that Havens would not dare oppose his passage. He was flying low when the aeroplane dropped. He tried to lift it, but failed.

Havens saw the danger and speeded toward the sinking machine. Felix cried out for help to the man whom he had recently tried to kill, and, in his frenzy, lost control of the machine. It turned turtle and dropped.

There was a splash in the ocean, a column of spray, a white face on the surface, and then the

planes of the *Ann* drifted on a high wave to the shore, only to be drawn back again.

"There goes the *Ann*!" Carl sighed.

"I'm afraid that Felix has gone with it!" Havens answered.

"He deserved all he got," Carl replied. "He was a snake in the grass."

"Still, it is our duty to save him if we can," Havens contended, bringing his machine out over the place where Felix had gone down.

The treacherous guide was not seen again. Drawn down by some powerful current, he had doubtless been carried out to find a grave in the depths of the ocean. It was growing dark when the *Sarah* was turned away from the spot, leaving the wreck of the *Ann* there on the beach.

The two had been in the air a long time, and their tanks were almost empty, so they decided to proceed to a little town called Tuscacuesco, situated still farther south of Zapotlan.

It was not certain that they could procure gasoline there, and yet, knowing the town to be on a river of considerable size, they hoped to find a supply store. They were not disappointed in this, as they found not only a supply store but a merchant fresh from New York, who was overjoyed at meeting them. After filling their tanks and dealing out such supplies as were needed, Barton insisted on the two

sharing his hospitality for the night, which they were glad to do.

Havens did not confide the real purpose of the trip to the merchant, though he seemed to be frank and sincere. He talked of his adventures as those of one out for a look at the wild places.

"I know," Barton said, lolling back in a great easy chair in his bachelor quarters over the store, "that many Americans come to Mexico expecting wild adventures. Few of them find what they seek. Your experiences have been exceptional. The disappearance of your two companions is mysterious, and should be reported to the officers. Also, the death of this guide. There is no knowing what may be said regarding his disappearance, and he was last seen with one of your party!"

"With one of my boys who never returned," Havens said.

"That is all very well," Barton went on, "but there is no proof that this boy, Ben, is not hiding somewhere."

"One seems to draw suspicion out of the air!" Havens smiled.

"It certainly is a suspicious country," grinned Barton. "For instance, there is a suspicion hereabouts that a good many of the tourists who come down here are in search of gold!"

"I never understood that gold had been found in

Jalisco," Havens replied, wondering just how much Barton knew of the famous crater.

"All right!" Barton smiled. "Go at it your own way, but I'll tell you now that every one who has come here in search of a crater which vomits out gold has gone back empty handed!"

"How many have come here on such a ridiculous mission?" asked Havens.

"Quite a few!" was the hesitating reply. "Quite a few before your own party came along! I shouldn't sell much gasoline if it wasn't for that fabled crater! Not enough to pay me for keeping a supply."

"Have any of them ever found the crater?" Havens asked, in a moment.

"They have not," was the answer. "They have found craters, but none answering to the description of the one said to bring gold up by the load. To be frank with you, there is no such crater."

Havens did not continue the conversation. He saw that the shrewd merchant was trying to get him into an argument regarding the existence of the gold crater, and decided to remain silent on the subject. During the evening Barton frequently reverted to the matter, as if anxious to secure an opinion from Havens, but he did not succeed.

The merchant, however, seemed to bear Havens no ill will because of his caution, and in the morning wished him all the good luck in the world as he

sailed away. He noticed, however, that Barton followed the course of the *Sarah* with a glass as long as it was in sight.

"That fellow isn't so slow!" Carl observed, as the flying machine bore away to the north. "He seems to know a good deal about that gold crater, and to be anxious to discourage any attempt to find it."

"That is the way I sized him up," Havens replied. "Well, we'll now take a turn over the country in search of Ben and Jimmie!"

The machine was now brought to a moderate gait, in order that the mountain spaces might be closely surveyed, it being Havens' belief that both boys would be found in some of the canyons. His idea was that they had been taken away in order that they might be forced to disclose his own plans, which was not far from wrong.

He knew, however, that neither Jimmie nor Ben knew anything definite about the location of the gold crater, so they would be unable to give the kidnappers any satisfaction. Failing to gain the information sought, the rascals, would, he thought, drop the lads in some out-of-the-way place and go on about their business.

"This crater," Carl said, after a long look through the glass, "is supposed to send out smoke and steam when the gold is up?"

"That is the idea!" replied Havens. "Smoke or steam!"

"Then catch hold of this glass," Carl went on, "And take a look over that high elevation! There's steam, or smoke, enough over there to hide a great deal of gold! Look at it swirl up!"

Havens took the glass and turned it in the direction of Devil Pool, where Jimmie, Ben, and Glenn were at that moment wondering what they were going to do with the pumas which had stationed themselves in their front yard! He looked only a moment and then speeded up!

"That looks pretty good to me!" Havens said. "The steam comes from the side, and not from the top, of a muntain, and that indicates that we are on the right track. Colima, you see, is off the other way, so this mess of steam can't come from that. Guess we've found it."

"I wish we'd found Jimmie and Ben!" Carl put in.

"We'll keep on looking for them as soon as we locate the banner of steam," Havens promised. "There is no knowing how soon this demonstration will cease, and we may as well know where to look for it after the steam has died out. We shall be able to get a good view of it as soon as we pass around that snow-white peak."

It was when the *Sarah* swept out from behind the peak and flew over to the north that the boys, virtually imprisoned by the pumas, saw her. At first they feared that she would continue on her way to

the north, but she soon turned and drove straight for the cavern's mouth.

Presently she dropped down so they could not see her because of the column of steam lifting from Devil Pool, then they gave up all hope. She was about to leave them, they thought, and if there was anything in the world they wanted more than rescue from the pumas it was to establish communication with their friends.

They could not go too close to the mouth, because the kitten puma was still playing with his toes on the floor, and the mother and father were guarding it closely, ready to spring the instant any one approached it, so they could not signal.

Then a puff of wind blew the steam to one side and Carl and Havens caught sight of the mouth of the cavern and the pumas sitting there.

"There are two handsome rugs down there!" Carl cried. "Suppose we get them? I'll shoot the big one first!"

The puff of wind died out, and the aeroplane was enveloped in steam which was too hot and too damp for comfort, so Havens put the machine up and circled away, much to the disgust of the waiting boys. In a moment it came into sight again, closer than before, and a shot was heard.

The bullet missed the puma and chipped a rock close to his nose, spattering fragments of stone into his face. Another shot clipped the mother's ear, de-

stroying any appetite for breakfast of Gringo she might have had. The two beasts looked at each other and growled.

Then the mother seized the kitten, receiving a box on the ear from its soft paw as she did so, and the three disappeared around the ledge in quick time. The boys rushed out of the cavern and shouted.

But the *Sarah* shifted her course to the north again and flew slowly away! Watching with anxiety in their faces, the boys saw her turn once more! Had they heard their shouts? Would they come back?

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WRECKING OF THE SARAH.

"STRANGE thing where those pumas went to so suddenly!" Carl exclaimed, as the *Sarah* mounted into the air again. "One moment they were there at the mouth of their den, and the next they were out of sight."

"They probably went inside," Havens suggested, wheeling the machine to the east to escape the cloud of steam. "They probably keep house in that hole in the rocks near where you fired at them, and went in."

"No, they did not," Carl contended. "I saw 'em running along a ledge to the east. Suppose you turn that way. We may find 'em hiding in a place where we can get them. I want those rugs!"

"So do they!" laughed Havens. "Better let the brutes alone. Did you see one of them seize the kitten and make off with it in her mouth? There was a domestic scene for you! Let them alone, kid. This is their land; they came here before we did."

Where's the use of killing things, anyway, unless you have to in order to live?"

"All right!" Carl acquiesced. "We'll have to let 'em live, I guess, for I don't see them anywhere. Have you got your landmarks so you can run back here again after we have made a search for the boys?"

"Yes," was the reply. "See, there is the pool to go by. If the steam dies down there'll still be a pool, for the stream feeds it from the higher levels. And there's that cavern where you shot at the pumas. Above is a spiral of smoke from the crater we are looking after. No trouble to find this place again!"

"Did you hear anything?" asked Carl, as the *Sarah* was turned to the north again. "Thought I heard some one calling to me."

"I heard nothing," Havens declared. "Which way did the sound come from? Perhaps we'd better investigate."

"It came from the steam!" Carl asserted. "Seemed to issue right out of the middle of it. We'd better go back."

Because a whiff of wind swept the steam aside just then the boys below saw the *Sarah* turn, and they gave a shout which reached the ears of both Havens and Carl, though they were still some distance away.

"There! There it is again!" Carl shouted. "That was meant for us! Whether it is Jimmie or Ben, or some one else, we ought to find out about it!

There they are! There they are! Both of them! And there's some one else with them, too. That will be Glenn!"

The excited lad almost tipped the machine over as he squirmed about in his seat and pointed to the mouth of the cavern, from which a red cloth was now waving, the ladder having been torn apart in order to use one rail as a signal pole! When the boys saw the *Sarah* turning their way again they fairly danced with joy. It was too good to be true.

"Look at the likes of them!" laughed Carl, as he saw the lads swinging about at the mouth of the cavern. "I wonder where they met, and how they came to be in that cave!"

"What I'm thinking about just now," Havens said, "is a place to land. All this country seems to be standing straight up and down."

"You might strike at the head of that ridge," Carl suggested, "and run down it until you could stop. I don't see any other opening for a visit to the boys. Let's try it, anyway."

"And break the machine and our necks," grinned Havens. "No, we'll have to find a better place than that. Wonder if I could cut in between the column of steam and the mouth of the cavern? I'd like to say good morning to the boys. Believe I will try it, anyway."

"You'll get cooked with steam!" Carl prophesied.

In a moment the *Sarah* shot through the narrow

breathing space which lay between the column of steam and the mouth of the cave. As she swept by Glenn made a trumpet of his hands and shouted:

“Go to the upper pool and land!”

Havens heard the suggestion and turned east after rounding the steam, which continued to ascend in great swirling columns, driven at intervals to the east by the wind from the Pacific. Beyond the ridge which cut the canyon into two sections and divided it with the natural dam which made the falls and the pool above it, Havens saw a level space, close to the margin of the upper pool.

Spiraling down, cautiously feeling his way, the aviator neared the level surface he sought. When about twenty feet from the rocky floor below, one of the unaccountable accidents aviators dread occurred. The motors stopped, the planes skimmed the air, and the aeroplane dropped, carrying Havens and Carl down with it—not free of the underwork, but inextricably mixed with it.

Ben, Jimmie, and Glenn, who had seen the accident, rushed toward the struggling mass and began pulling at their friends in their efforts to get them out of the wreck. Havens groaned the instant they touched him, but Carl explained to them in good Bowery language that they were only in the way. In a moment he extricated himself, and stood by the side of Ben, apparently none the worse for his tumble.

There was no time to be wasted in greetings, for Havens was still under the machine, groaning as if in great pain. After a great deal of work the boys removed the framework which held him down and carried him, on one of the broken planes, back to the cavern.

It was a very sober looking group of boys that gathered around him while Ben proceeded to ascertain the extent of his injuries. At one time Ben had been in the office of a prominent New York surgeon, and had often assisted him in his ordinary operations.

"Well," Ben said, a frown wrinkling his brows, "there's nothing the matter except that he's got a bump on the head, and a sprained ankle, and a broken leg—just a simple fracture of a thigh bone."

"Nothing the matter of him but bumps and broken bones!" repeated Jimmie. "What did you think would be the matter of him?"

Havens lay white and still for a moment and then opened his eyes and asked:

"How about the *Sarah*? Can she ever be used again? Looks like a very bad smash," he added, in a despairing tone as he closed his eyes.

"We'll look at the *Sarah* after we get you doctored up!" Ben answered.

He then sent Jimmie hunting for twine, and Glenn to finding boards or limbs which would answer for splints, and Carl to feeding the injured man a stim-

ulating mixture prepared from the native whisky, called mesial.

In a short time the twine and the splints were found and Havens was strong enough to undergo the operation of leg-setting. It was a hard pull the boys had, but in a second the bones snapped back into place and were securely fastened there.

"Now," Ben said, addressing Havens with a half-concealed grin on his face, "all you've got to do is to stay in the house for about six weeks. We'll trust you for your board, and the surgeon can wait for his pay. In the end, if you owe us much more than the *Sarah* is worth you can give us your note! I don't think the *Sarah* is worth much, so we may all have to walk back, which will be expensive as shoes are going up in price!"

"Aw, let him alone!" cried Jimmie. "He's got troubles of his own right now, without you kidding him. You let him alone and go look at the machine. I'll bet a cookie against the New York post-office that she's a bursted community. Come on! I'll go with you!"

Leaving Havens asleep and under the care of Carl, the other boys went over to where the wreck of the *Sarah* lay. It did, indeed, look like a very badly bursted community, as Jimmie had predicted.

"This is a nice proposition!" Ben exclaimed. "Now we'll walk home."

"Oh, there's another machine down by Devil

Pool," Jimmie said, "and a dead man keeping it company! Perhaps we can make a good one out of the two. Anyway, we'll have plenty of time to mess with the job before Havens gets well enough to start on a journey home."

Havens was very ill for a few days, and the boys watched him continuously, one of them always being at his side. When off watch the lads were doing their best to repair the *Sarah*, but it was a tough proposition, as the aeroplane had been badly broken in the fall.

The machine in which Jimmie had been carried away by the dead man was dragged from the margin of the boiling pool and taken to pieces in the hope that the broken parts of the *Sarah* might be replaced by those of the machine so strangely brought there. As the machines were of different patterns, it required a great deal of work to make the pieces match, but Havens always carried a kit of tools with him, and the boys worked steadily, so in a short time it became evident that their efforts would eventually meet with success.

In the meantime, the business which had brought the boys to Mexico was not forgotten. Havens did nothing but talk of the steaming crater higher up on the mountain, and the boys soon came to believe that the mine of gold had indeed been discovered. Havens was impatient of delay.

"If I could only get out of here!" he said one

day, "I could soon learn whether our trip has been in vain! If I only had the use of my leg again, I'd be in that crater in half a day, and learn the truth."

"Why don't you let us go?" asked Jimmie, on watch at that time.

"I want to be the first one to enter the crater," was the reply.

"'Fraid we'll steal the gold?" asked Jimmie, with a grin.

"No, indeed," was the reply. "If you boys wanted to steal the gold, I couldn't stop you. You might walk away with it and leave me lying here, secure in the belief that I'd never get out to reproach you."

"I think we'll do that some day!" laughed Jimmie.

At the end of a week the water in the pool began to cool down. The column of steam was not so high, and the surface of the pool seemed to be lowering. Havens sighed at the information, for he believed that the gold in the crater could be discovered only when the lava was up.

"I'd like to see the bottom of Devil Pool," Jimmie said to Ben, one day, before the water stopped boiling. "I've an idea!"

"You might dive down again, when it gets cool," laughed Ben.

"Couldn't remain down long enough," Jimmie re-

turned. "I want a good long time to look around it. As I said, I've got an idea!"

"Does it hurt?" asked Ben. "Shall I put splints on it for you?"

"Never you mind the splints!" Jimmie returned. "This idea deals with great things, and you wouldn't be expected to understand it if I should tell you about it. It sure is a peach of a notion!"

"How do I know that it is?" asked Ben, quizzically.

"Well," Jimmie went on, "suppose there is an opening between the crater above us and the bottom of this pool? Oh, you think there is, do you?" as Ben nodded. "Well, if lava comes through this opening in sufficient quantities to make the water here boil like a teakettle, why isn't the opening large enough for us to crawl through, if the water was out of it? We might get to the crater by the underground route."

"If the water was out!" laughed Ben. "The if is in the way."

"Now, don't get so gay!" cried Jimmie, enthusiastically. "If we could turn the water into that other canyon by building the upper dam higher, why couldn't we dry the pool and go through the tunnel we've been speaking of? The pool will soon dry out, for the rocks are hot, and all the moisture there is in it will go up in steam before they cool."

"Great head!" shouted Ben, and that was the

beginning of another job which seemed as difficult as that of repairing the aeroplane. The boys worked like beavers cutting a channel to lead the waters of the rivulet into the next canyon and building the upper dam higher.

Every day the pool cooled down, and the water sank lower, the stream now giving a supply no longer. Finally, one bright day, the bottom of the pool was quite dry, and then a great cavity under the mountain was found.

It was that very day that the hostile aeroplane appeared in the sky!

CHAPTER XX.

A LONG NIGHT OF WATCHING.

NATURALLY the appearance of the hostile aeroplane created something of a sensation in the camp on the mountain. There lay the bottom of Devil Pool, open to the light of the sun, with the dark cavern, presumably connecting with the crater farther up, in plain view.

No one could for a moment doubt the purpose of the boys in draining the pool. If the men who had followed Havens from New York to Maine, and from Maine to Mexico, were possessed of common sense, they would know at first glance that the maps carried by him—the maps which had so long been in such good demand—pointed to the crater far above the pool as the one believed to hold the gold. It was a critical situation.

“I’ll tell you what we ought to do,” Ben advised, as the four boys stood around the rough cot on which Havens lay. “We ought to move into the cavern leading to the crater. They couldn’t dislodge

us, and we could keep them out of the crater, and also out of the pool end of the tunnel."

"And our eats?" queried Jimmie. "In about three days we would be eating rock and lava sandwiches! You've got to guess again, young man."

"Besides," Havens added, "if we disappear in the cavern they will destroy the aeroplane. By the way, how nearly is it completed?"

"It ought to sail in a couple of days," Jimmie answered.

"Then," Havens continued, "we've got to stay here and keep them out of the connecting tunnel and out of the vicinity of the aeroplane. See if you can get an idea of the number coming, will you?"

"There are only two on the machine," Carl reported, in a moment.

"Yes," Ben went on, "but that machine landed two men not long ago. I saw it mounting after leaving them. If we wait, we'll see the flying machine drop again. They're coming in force!"

"How are you off for provisions, Glenn?" asked Havens.

"Just about out," was the discouraging reply. "I was figuring on going out after some as soon as the machine could be made to work. We are out of everything but a little coffee, a couple of quarts of meal, and the carton biscuit. I had a large supply when you came here, but you've just about cleaned me out!"

"We can catch fish!" Jimmie exclaimed.

"Not with those scoundrels shooting down at us," Havens suggested.

"We aren't going to starve!" Jimmie insisted. "Up on the coast of Maine I said we'd get off that island if a ship had to come out of the sky and take us off, and a ship did come out of the sky and take us off! Do you remember about that, boys?" he added.

"Of course," was Carl's reply.

"You've talked about nothing else ever since that night," Ben went on. "I don't see how you can get any ship to sail out of the sky and clear up this mess!"

"How do you know what will come out of the sky?" demanded Jimmie.

"We all know what's coming out of the sky!" laughed Ben. "And it is up to us to send it back again if we can! But how, that's the question that's got to be settled right soon. How?"

"I've got an idea!" Jimmie shouted. "We'll fill up the pool end of the tunnel so they won't know it's there, and then we'll keep at work on the *Sarah* just as if the accident was the only thing that was keeping us in this country. We'll be good to them if they come down, and the first chance we get we'll steal their flying machine. How's that for an idea?"

"All right," Havens answered, "if they don't catch us filling up the pool end of the tunnel."

"Why," the boy proposed, "why can't we clean this ridge up and roll the stones down into the pool, or into the place where the pool was? If they strike the lowest level, they will fill up the mouth of the tunnel."

"Another good suggestion," Havens said. "Perhaps two of you would better begin on the pool and two on the machine. But all must carry arms, for they are treacherous scoundrels, as I know to my cost."

"Well, there aren't so many of them now as there were when they came in, unless more have arrived. One lies in hospital, one went under with the *Ann*, and one was killed in a fall right by our front door. There are three accounted for, and I guess we can account for three more before we get done with them. It is all their own fault, too!"

"As Jimmie spoke he looked out on the spot where the man who had taken him away from the camp by force had been buried under a heap of rocks.

"I wonder if those were the three men who made trouble for us up on the coast of Maine?" asked Ben. "Doesn't seem as if all the bad ones were dead yet, the way they follow on after us!"

"If any members of that group are here," Havens suggested, "they will be the last ones to come to

the camp. There were four men, all from New York, who originally set out to secure the maps from me, by fair means or foul. At one time they all pretended to be friends of mine, so I know them perfectly."

"Then strangers will come, if any one does," Ben concluded, "and so we must be careful and not mistake honest people for thieves!"

"What would honest people be doing here?" demanded Carl, and all the others laughed.

For a moment the boy could not understand what they were laughing at, then he blushed and laughed with them.

"I didn't mean our party," he said, "as we came on legitimate business. We came here to find gold and put it into circulation!"

"So did the others!" Havens grinned. "And now," he added, "you boys would better be getting at the work mapped out, two at the ridge and two at the machine. Don't talk if we have callers."

The strange flying machine hovered in the sky above the mountain all day, landing only occasionally. There were always two men in the seats, and on one occasion there were three. The distant aviators seemed to be puzzled to know just where the column of steam had come from.

"I know exactly what is troubling them," Jimmie said, looking up from his work of tumbling rocks into the deepest part of the now empty pool, "they

came here because they saw the steam rising from the mountain, and now there is no steam in sight, and they can't tell exactly where it came from. They'll be down here asking questions before long."

This prediction was proven correct about the middle of the afternoon, when, entirely without warning, two rough-looking men came up the ridge and stopped where Ben and Glenn were working away at the machine.

"Had an accident?" one of them asked. "Bad place for one, this."

"Pretty bad place," admitted Ben, not pausing from his work.

"Any one hurt?" asked the other. "Bad place to get a doctor, this."

"Pretty bad," Ben agreed, "but we have a surgeon with us."

"Why, that's fine!" exclaimed the other, looking cautiously around as if he half expected to see a doctor in silk hat and white vest setting out on a round of visits with his medicine case in his hand.

The clatter of stones falling from the ridge to the bottom of the dry pool now attracted the attention of the visitors, and they passed on to the mouth of the cavern, but did not see Havens there for the reason that he was in the upper room, well back.

"You've got a job before you, young fellows," one of the men said, "if you've set out to fill that pit. What's the notion?"

Jimmie paused in his work and wrinkled his freckled nose at the man who had asked the question, then he drawled:

"We're not filling the pit. We're making a smooth landing for our aeroplane, if we ever get it so it will fly again!"

This was so original a fabrication, and yet so consistent with the surroundings, that Carl turned his face away so the visitors might not see the amusement in his eyes. Jimmie frowned at him to keep decent!

"The boys back there say you've had an accident," the visitor went on. "Where is the injured man?" "Is he very badly hurt?"

"It didn't hurt him very much," Jimmie answered, his face as sober as that of a judge on the bench. "There wasn't any bones broken. The fall just made him light headed. I'm him!"

"You're the one who had the tumble, eh?" asked the visitor, a slight look of annoyance in his face. "Then where is the man who came down here with you? I don't see him around anywhere."

"He's gone away," Jimmie answered, trying to give Carl the command to go into the cave if he couldn't keep his face straight. "He came down here to look for gold, and he left saying there wasn't enough here to fill a tooth for a hen!"

Carl vanished into the cavern and went up the

ladder to inform Havens of what was going on below.

"And Jimmie is telling a yard of lies!" Carl continued. "He says you have gone back home and that he is the one who fell out of the machine. Says it made him light headed! He's an awful liar, Jimmie is!"

"What are you fellows up here for?" asked Jimmie presently.

"Just to look over the country," was the reply. "We came in on foot only this morning, and are ready to go back right now."

Jimmie was thinking that he wasn't the only one who was stretching the truth to fit purposes, but did not say so. His idea was to make friends with the fellows and ascertain what line their attacks were likely to be made on.

"Well," he said, in a moment, "we're pretty near out of provisions, but you'd better remain and have supper with us. I presume you're a long way from your camp? And it is rather rough traveling up here."

"We haven't made any camp yet," replied the spokesman, winking at his companion. "Perhaps we'll camp right here, if you don't object."

This was a new proposition. The men were there to watch every movement, and the lad knew it. If they remained there they would soon know all about

the tunnel to the crater and also all about Havens being there.

Perhaps, the quick-witted boy thought, they could be frightened away.

"We'd like to have you remain with us," he said, "because we have to keep guard nights on account of the wild beasts. They are fierce up in this mountainous district. There are holes all through these cliffs, and we can't locate the brutes so as to kill 'em. They near got me last night. If you'll stay you can help watch, for we're all nearly worn out with standing guard. It is something awful, night after night."

Now, this wasn't a suitable argument for the boy to have used at that time. If he had stopped to consider, he would never have suggested that the visitors stand guard. With an excuse for roaming around while the boys were asleep, they might work mischief to the aeroplane and discover why the stones were being tumbled into the pool.

"We'll be glad to watch to-night," the visitors said, "and let you all get a good night's sleep. We'll go now and bring our packs over and pick out a hole in this honeycombed old hill to keep them in."

The visitors were soon back, much to the disgust of the boys, and supper was prepared. While the meal was being eaten the lads made a great show of merriment and hospitality, but they were planning for the night every minute of the time.

It was arranged that, after dark, Jimmie should creep away and try to discover the place from which the camping outfits brought by the men had been carried. It was thought the aeroplane they had seen in the sky was there, and that a campfire would reveal the location. Ben was to hide among the rocks and watch the aeroplane, so that no harm might come to it, and Carl and Glenn were to watch the pool to see that the visitors did not go prowling about in the bottom, near the mouth of the tunnel.

It was Glenn who, not far from midnight, first sent out the sleepy call of a bird, the danger signal which had been agreed upon. When Ben rushed forward he found a thin stream of burning lava trickling into the pit, with two men scrambling out!

The visitors had sneaked unobserved into the deep hole and had been caught in the outburst of liquid fire, for they were climbing out as if badly burned!

CHAPTER XXI.

DEATH IN DEVIL POOL.

“HELP! Help! Throw us a line!” the men called as they scrambled weakly up the steep incline. “The lava is gaining on us!”

It was, indeed. The men slipped back every instant, but the pool of fire forming below them held all it gained. It mounted higher and higher, with popping bubbles and ghastly gleams of deadly gasses running along the surface. The lifting gas was almost overpowering to the boys on the edge of the pool, so they realized that the men below could not live long unless rescued from it.

The excavation which the waters of the rivulet had made for the pool was quite shallow except at the point where Jimmie had dropped, feet foremost, into it. There it was at least forty feet in depth.

The sides sloped steeply down in this great basin, with few rocks in the walls which might assist one in climbing out. When the visitors were discovered they were only about ten feet from the bottom, with the lava scarcely half that distance below them.

In spite of the protests of his chums, Ben ran to the cavern and brought the ladder. Then he covered his face with a thick cloth and crept out into the shallow pool excavation, stopping only when he came to where the stiff fall to the lower pit began. Almost suffocated with the poisonous gas, he pushed the ladder down and clung to it.

"Catch on!" he shouted. "Climb up to it! "I can't remain here long!"

The men scrambled toward the ladder, often getting in the way of each other. At last they both gained a height from which they could reach the lower rung, and both grabbed it with a force which came near drawing it out of Ben's hands. He started to pull up, but found the load too heavy. He called to the boys to assist and, above the hissing of the lava, the men below heard the call.

Then they realized that the boys could not haul them both out at once, and that the man who remained would be certain to come to his death there before the ladder could again be lowered. In the dreadful light of the burning mass below, Ben saw the two men fighting for the first chance at life!

They clenched and tugged at each other's necks and arms, each trying to force the other out of reach of the saving device which hung now, just within reach of their fingers. They struck at each other's faces, and more than once both came near falling back into the flames.

Then, one delivering a more effective blow than had before been struck, the recipient fell, catching at the wall as he slipped down. He did not succeed in grasping any projection strong enough to stay his fall.

But at last, with only an inch to spare, his fingers caught the foot of the man who had sent him toward eternity. The hand—burned now by sparks which had ascended from the pit and fallen back again, some resting on the heads of the fighting men until the hair burst into little spots of flame, some clinging to their hands, and others setting their clothing on fire—this shriveling, suffering hand caught the shoe and held fast

Slowly the man above was drawn down. Ben cried out to the frantic men to cling to the ladder until he could get help to draw them up, but they did not heed. In fact, one was so far down that he could not have reached a rung, and the other was too busy kicking his companion off to make reply. There was a last final struggle, the fingers clinging to the ladder relaxed, and both men went down to a fiery death in the lava!

Ben was nearly unconscious when the boys, all of whom, save Jimmie, were now on the scene, brought him back to the ledge by forming a living chain. All the lads were deadly pale, for the horror of the scene they had witnessed was strong upon them.

"It is awful! Awful!"

Ben closed his eyes for an instant, but the tragedy which had been enacted before his eyes did not leave the figments of his brain, and he still seemed to see the men struggling in that awful pit.

The lad had received burns on his hands and neck, and by the time these had been attended to daylight was showing over the top of the mountains to the east. It was a dreary daylight, too, for the clouds hung low down over the peaks, and a chill wind was blowing off the sea.

The lava continued to rise in the pit until the boys thought of once more moving into the upper cavern. The fumes arising from the burning mass were choking, suffocating, and so they hastened to hang what clothing they could spare over the entrance to the cavern where Havens lay, anxious, but confident that the boys would play well their parts.

"Now," Ben said, when the poisonous gases were, in a measure, shut out, "we've got to wait again. It may be days before the lava will run back into the tunnel. May be weeks, for all I know."

"Let me tell you this, me son," Glenn interposed, "that lava never will flow back into the tunnel. Why should it? It will fill the pool with solid stone and iron and then fill the tunnel with the same sort of packing. There will never be a tunnel there again!"

"But why didn't it do that before?" demanded Carl.

"Because the lava was red hot when it poured down and so ran into the pit. The pit has been filling for years, but now, with a perfectly dry bed, it will be filled to the top as none of it will pass off on the steam which carried some the other away, and this will block the tunnel, which is now a sealed proposition."

Ben arose and looked out of the cavern, drawing a curtain of coats and shirts aside for that purpose. The pit was still bubbling and steaming, but was not rising higher.

"I reckon it has reached its level!" he cried.

"Yes," Glenn admitted, "you're right. That must be the height of the lava in the crater where this comes from. We won't have far to go when we come to the crater itself. We're in luck!"

"Why," Ben said, with a start, after a time, "where is Jimmie?"

"Guess he hasn't come back," Carl answered. "Any one seen him since he went off to hunt up the camp where those men were stopping?"

No one had. The boys looked each other anxiously in the face. The time had been so exciting, so full of peril, that no one had noted the absence of the boy.

"He may have been captured by some of the rascals who are chasing us over the mountains,"

Carl suggested. "I know there were more than two men in the camp before the dead men left it."

"And the chances are that there is a flying machine there, too," Ben declared. "I wish the kid could swipe it! Wouldn't that be great?"

They all thought it would, but none had hope that he would be able to secure the aeroplane, the only serviceable one, it seemed, in the district. Two had been wrecked there!

The lads cooked breakfast with little attention to the needs of appetite. They were all thinking of Jimmie. Had he been taken prisoner again, or had he met with an accident? Ben was determined to follow him, but the others convinced him that no living person could discover from the rocks, which way he had gone, so he remained with the others.

By noon the lava in Devil Pool—pool no longer!—began to cool, and it became evident that what Glenn had said regarding the future state of the place was correct. The hollow where the water had been was now full of melted rock, iron, and such other material as had been thrown up by the crater over to the south, and had found its way through the tunnel to Devil Pool—just in time to take two lives!

After dinner the boys ran down to the margin of the pool and began digging away at the lava with a pick which belonged to Glenn. At first their search was disappointing, but presently Glenn held up a bit

of the hardened product of the crater which was well sprinkled with gold.

"Gold!" he cried. "Gold, gold, gold!"

"It must have come from the crater," Carl shouted back.

"Why, of course it did, and the crater must be full of it."

The boys danced up and down in their exuberant joy at the find they had made. It seemed to them then that the object of their journey had already been accomplished. The gold was there before them! Real gold!

Havens, too, was greatly excited when the boys rushed into the cavern where he lay, his broken leg mending fast.

"It must be that we have come to the right place," he said, as he examined the chunks of lava brought in by the enthusiastic youngsters.

"Is this where you thought we'd find the gold?" Ben asked.

"Not at all," was the reply. "I thought it would be found farther to the south. Indeed, there may be other craters here which give forth gold at certain times. But Good Luck has landed us at one which appears to have the necessary wealth, so we'll investigate this one and let the others go. I shall be glad to get back to New York once more."

"Think of us all going back rich!" shouted Ben.

"Hold on!" Havens advised, gravely. "You

boys are working for me by the month—\$100 a month!—and if we find gold it will all belong to me. I thought you understood that!”

The lads looked grave for a moment, and then Glen laughed.

“You are mistaken!” he said. “I’m not working by the month for you, and the gold was found in my front yard! I shall claim half of it, and the boys can share with me! But we haven’t got it yet!”

“We’ll soon have it,” Ben insisted, with a wink at Glenn. “We’ll go right up now and take a peek into this wonderful storehouse!”

“I see that I am going to have trouble settling with you boys!” Havens observed, with a twinkle in his eyes. “Well, we can’t divide the gold until we get it, so you two, Glenn and Ben, go on up to the crater and leave Carl and Dodo with me. I wish Jimmie would return!”

“Why, Jimmie hasn’t been here since last night!” cried Carl. “We ought to look him up instead of going after this gold! He may be in some sort of mix-up with the pirates who live around here.”

“If we hadn’t been so busy and so excited,” Ben hastened to say, “I should have begun a search for him long ago. I’ve been thinking about him ever since the pit began to fill. Then the men were killed, and I forgot him for a minute. Who’ll go with me?”

“Now, listen a moment,” Havens insisted.

"Don't go running off in search of the boy at this time. The fact that the two men who came to such terrible deaths in the lava came here shows that the men who are following us suspect that the treasure is here."

"Of course!" Carl shouted, "and of course——"

"Just a minute!" Havens interrupted. "In a short time the men who were left behind by those two will come to look for them. They may come to us here, or they may go directly to the crater above us—the crater from which the lava came, which found its way to the pool. If they come here, we must keep out of their way. If they go to the crater above us, we must see that they don't get into it."

"And you think they'll bring Jimmie when they come?" asked Ben, his mind still fixed on the recovery of his chum.

"If they don't bring him," Havens answered, grimly, "we may be able to induce one of them to tell us where he is!"

"That's the talk," cried Glenn. "Now, about this crater," he went on. "I know all about it. I've been there, but never just following an eruption. I've never seen signs of gold there, but there may be gold for all that. If this lava in the pool came from that crater, there surely is gold there, for the product of the volcano shows it."

"Is it a hard place to reach?" asked Ben.

"It will take us more than one day to climb up to

it," was the answer, "for there are high-up canyons between the ridges and benches, and we shall have to climb twice the height of the mountain to get to the lips of the crater. You understand what mountain climbing is?" he added, nodding toward Havens.

"I certainly do," was the reply. "Well, you may as well be getting ready for the ascent," Havens suggested. "I wish I could go with you."

"Must I stay here?" asked Carl, looking disconsolately at Havens.

"Some one must remain with me," was the aviator's reply.

"If we only had a flying machine!" Ben complained. "If we hadn't let the brutes steal the *Ann*, and if the *Sarah* hadn't taken such a tumble, we might all get up there before noon, Mr. Havens as well as the rest."

"Why not wait until we get the *Sarah* ready for flight?" urged Carl, who wanted to be in the thick of action, and dreaded the inactivity of the cavern while the others were away."

Havens shook his head, thus bringing a frown to Carl's face.

"We must get there as soon as possible," he said. "If we don't, the other fellows will get possession. If you really want to go, Carl," he continued, with an air of resignation, "I can, perhaps, get along with

the company of Dodo, though if the fellows should chance to come here, I——”

“Not on your whiskers!” cried Carl, getting slangy in his remorse at the very thought of his proposing to leave Havens alone, practically unguarded, “I’ll not consent to any such arrangement! Glenn knows the way, and Ben is the strong man of the party, so I’ll have to remain here!”

“Think of having the choice company of Dodo!” Glenn said, aggravatingly.

Carl wrinkled his nose at the boy and dashed out of the cavern, to return directly with gesturing hands and protruding eyeballs.

“There’s a flying machine coming right now!” he shouted. “Coming right down by the wrecked *Sarah*, just as if the driver knew that to be the only place to land! I’ll bet it is Jimmie. The little thief!”

All rushed out on the bench of rock, except the injured man, and looked up at the sky. It was a large aeroplane they saw, driven by one person. It was winging down slowly, quivering in air currents and showing the hand of an amateur aviator. The face of the driver could not be seen.

“I’ll bet my next million it is Jimmie!” cried Ben.

“Doesn’t look like Jimmie to me!” Glenn answered.

CHAPTER XXII.

JIMMIE WINS A FUEL SUPPLY.

It was pretty dark when Jimmie left the cavern and took the ledge by way of which the two unwelcome visitors had approached. It led, of course, past the spot where the wrecked *Sarah* lay, and the lad stopped to secure an electric flashlight which the others had been using while working over the machine in the dusk.

Although the light had been used several times already, Jimmie found the dry battery in good condition, capable, as he thought, of doing good service throughout the night. However, he shut off the rays as soon as he had completed his examination, resolved to reserve the battery for work more serious than that of lighting the way down the ledge.

Besides, he figured that the pirates, as he termed them, must be close at hand, as the visitors, when they went for their outfits, had not been gone long enough to travel a great distance and return. Then, he reflected, the light might reveal his whereabouts to his foes.

A breeze which had arisen just before sunset had cleared the sky of clouds, and the stars shone through the thin mountain air in all their brilliancy, so the boy could see very well as he crept slowly down the ledge. The mountain elevation upon which the caverns were set, and along the side of which the ledge ran, seemed to the tired boy to extend for miles to the north, but he kept on bravely, believing that he would have to pass an angle before he might hope to discover what he sought—a campfire and an aeroplane.

The bench, for it was little else in time, was rough and broken. Now it crumbled away to a bare handbreath, now it sank so that Jimmie was obliged to swing by his hands as he dropped to a lower level. Now it pitched upward until it took all his strength to make the ascent.

At last, about ten o'clock, as he figured, he came to an angle where the continuity of the mountain was broken by a canyon which separated the peak which stood above the caverns from another farther north.

The dim, uncertain view down this canyon revealed no campfire, and for a time the boy was discouraged. It was dark and cold up there on the mountain, and the fear of wild beasts and creeping things found occasional place in the breast of the boy. The passage between the peaks seemed to lead out to a tableland of some extent, but no outlines were discernible.

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Once while the lad stood there at the angle, irresolute, he heard the soft "pad-pad" of moving feet to the left. He took the chance of throwing his light in that direction, and caught a glimpse of a half-grown puma as it crept, afraid, away from the round illumination.

For a time Jimmie seriously considered the idea of returning to the cavern, then he choked back his timidity and pushed on. The walking was easier now, and the descent was more marked. The space between the two mountain bulks widened out as he advanced until what appeared to be a lofty valley lay before him under the stars.

With his back against a wall of rock, the light ready to spring out in front, the boy sat and rested, his eyes on the space beyond. It seemed to be just a mountain valley, probably 5,000 feet above the sea.

Carefully, painstakingly, he searched over every inch of it. At first there was only the dark desolation of a remote mountain pass, then, after his eyes had become more familiar with the night, he thought he caught the gleam of a fire some distance away.

"They think we won't find 'em here!" the lad soliloquized, as he moved away from his resting place and started toward the fire.

As he moved along, trifling elevations at times blocked his view of the little point of fire, but always it showed again when he crept forward.

It was after midnight, according to the boy's calcu-

lations, when he came close enough to the campfire to distinguish two figures moving about in front of it. The blaze, which seemed to be fed by dry mountain grass was backed by a vertical wall of rock, so the figures he saw were always between the illumination and the boy.

The boy crept closer, hoping to be able to hear what, if anything, was being said by the men at the fire. The light blaze was uncertain—now blazing high, now dying down—so he was able to get close to an angle in the wall against which the fire backed, and only a short distance away from it. Besides being convenient to the boy as a place for securing information, the angle he occupied was cozily warm, and that was a great deal, as he was chilled to the bone.

For a time the men walked moodily about, saying nothing. Then one of them stopped squarely in front of the fire, so that his face was brought into full view, and exclaimed, half angrily:

“It beats the Old Nick where those fellows are! They have been gone long enough to have gained the knowledge they were sent to secure a dozen times over!”

“I think we must be hoodooed,” the other said, in a moment. “There is the aviator in hospital, the man who went out to get one of the boys to run the machine unaccounted for, the man who stole the

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Ann still away, and now the two men who were sent to the caverns fail to return."

"Seven of us came in here," the first speaker grumbled, "and now we two are alone. Such evil luck no one ever had before."

The two men stood talking in front of the fire so that the boy could see their faces as plainly as if the sun shone on them. One was the evil-faced fellow who had forced his way into the cottage on the coast of Maine. The other was the smooth-looking man who had threatened Havens in the deserted house on that same night.

Jimmie chuckled at the thought that the two conspirators were alone. He did not know that at about that time two were perishing in the burning pit, but he knew where two of the others were. One lay buried near the caverns and the other had found a grave in the ocean!

"If anything happens to Mort and Dave," the first speaker went on, "we shall have to walk out of here. Neither of us can operate the aeroplane. "We'll have to leave the *Blade* and tramp back to the city."

"That's what we'll have to do!" was the gruff reply.

Jimmie chuckled as he hugged his corner closer.

"I'll save 'em the trouble of leaving it here and sending back after it," he mused. "They owe us a machine, anyway!"

"Look here, Sam," the fellow who had forced his way into the cottage on that other night said, "if this goes wrong, I'm going to quit you. I have stood by for months, and every trip to this infernal mountain has been worse than the previous one. We are no nearer the gold now than we were when you first took the notion into your head that there were millions buried in some volcano hereabouts."

"Well, Gregg," the other said, coolly, "when you know that I've given up looking for the gold you'll know, also, that I'm dead! I'm going to keep up the search, anyway, until I get back some of the money I've spent in the search. Why don't those men return? It is most morning."

"Perhaps I'd better go and look them up!" said Gregg, in a sarcastic tone of voice. "Most of our time here has been spent in looking each other up!"

"And leave me alone here?" demanded Sam. "Why, I wouldn't stay in this desolate land alone until daylight for all the money you could pile into all the extinct craters in Mexico! I'm getting the shivers, hanging around here, and that's the fact."

"Still, you want to come again if this trip produces no results?"

"I've got to, but not alone. I need the money!"

"Don't count on me for another trip," Gregg said. "Perhaps I'd better step out and see if the *Blade* is still where we left her," he added, moving to the

south, and keeping well along the wall against which the fire was burning.

"Don't stay long," urged the one who had been called Sam.

When Gregg got out of the uncertain circle of light about the fire, Jimmie left his corner and followed him.

"I think I'd like to know where that machine is, myself," he chuckled. "As I said before, they owe us an aeroplane, to make up for the *Ann*, which they stole and lost in the Pacific ocean!"

Gregg walked for some distance along a tolerably level stretch of valley, and then turned off to the right, which was to the north. The boy kept as close as possible to him without making his presence known.

Finally Gregg turned an angle of rock and came out on a space which was as level as a floor, having been planed smooth during some movement of rocks in ages gone by. He walked forward, his figure plainly seen under the stars, and bent over an aeroplane which occupied a position at the head of a little slope.

After walking carefully about the machine, he struck a match and examined the motors. Satisfied with his inspection, apparently, he blew out the match and started back toward the fire.

"Me for the machine now!" the boy thought, as

Gregg turned away. "The boys will be glad to see me cutting the atmosphere with it!"

When Gregg was out of sight, Jimmie approached the machine and bent over the motors. They seemed to be in excellent condition.

By this time the other had rounded the angle of rock, and so the boy switched on his light and examined the tanks. Then a shade of disgust came to his freckled face. The tanks were empty!

"Now, what do you know about that?" the lad muttered, scratching his red head meditatively. "Any man who will go away and leave his tanks empty ought to be obliged to walk home!"

There was just a bare possibility that there was gasoline hidden in the vicinity of the fire, and Jimmie determined to go back and find out about it, if such a thing were possible. When he got back, the two men were sitting in front of the blaze, evidently disputing over the thing to do, so he had plenty of opportunity to scout about in quest of the gasoline which he believed to be there somewhere.

After a long search he discovered a can of gasoline away to the north of the fire. Why it had been left there he could not imagine.

The supposition, however, was that the rascals had purposely left the tanks empty, and had placed the supply of gasoline at a distance in order that no thief might rob them of the machine, even if their camp should be successfully invaded.

"Clever fellows!" chuckled the lad, lifting the can in his arms and starting away with it, intending to keep in the shadows some distance from the fire.

But the instant he lifted the can from the ground a strange thing happened. He heard a sharp snap, as of a strong cord breaking, and then a pistol shot.

The shot came from the fire, and was followed by oaths and cries of rage. The boy pulled at the can again and heard another cord snap, heard another pistol shot. Then swift footsteps approached the spot where he stood, with the precious can in his arms.

He knew very well what had happened. The crafty rascals had tied cords to the can and led them out to pistol triggers close by the fire! They had left the aeroplane practically unguarded, but had, as they believed, made certain that the fuel supply would not be stolen!

Hampered as he was by his load, Jimmie made as good headway as was possible, but the running men were swinging in ahead of him, so as to head him off from the aeroplane. So he turned directly to the north, and was soon lost in the shadows of the ridges.

The men searched for him in vain, and then did the very worst thing they could have done from Jimmie's standpoint. They went and sat down by the aeroplane, so that it could not be taken away,

even if the gasoline had been stolen! Another clever trick, the boy thought.

Jimmie pondered long as to what he ought to do. It looked like a hopeless case for him! Then an odd thought came to him!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SECRET OF THE CRATER.

APPROACHING as closely to the aeroplane as he could without attracting the attention of the watchers, the boy deposited the can of gasoline on the ground and removed his coat. After saturating it thoroughly with the fluid, he ran swiftly toward the fire.

"I reckon they'll think their house is burning up, directly," he muttered, as he ran along over the uneven surface of rock.

Reaching the fire, he stopped and scratched his head again, his eyes alternately on the fire and on the saturated coat.

"If I drop it on now," he thought, "they'll see me when they come running. Or, if they don't see me here, they'll be likely to bunt into me when I'm on my way to the machine! Now, if I had——"

His foot caught up an end of the cord which had been fastened to the can and drew it about provokingly. Jimmie laughed, ran from the vicinity of the blaze with his coat, and sat down to tie the cord to

an extended sleeve. This accomplished, he left the coat where it lay and ran out to the fire with one end of the cord in his hand.

It was cotton cord, rather loosely wound, and sure to hold any flame set to it. The boy dropped the end of the cord in the fire, waited an instant to see that the fire ran along evenly, that there was no danger of its dying out before it reached the oil-soaked coat, and then ran to the place where he had left the gasoline.

He had hardly reached the spot when a flame shot up around the angle of rock, filling the valley with a red light. The men gazed at it a moment and then ran toward their camp.

Jimmie had his tanks filled in a moment, and the first intimation the men had that they had been tricked was the clamor of the motors as the aeroplane sailed away, with Jimmie, coatless but happy, in control!

The boy saw the fire below, saw the two men dancing with rage before the illuminated wall of rock, and then the dark spaces were before him. The machine worked perfectly for a time, but then the propellers seemed to lose their power. He was certain that he had done all that was necessary in filling the tanks, but determined to drop down on the first available spot and examine the aeroplane.

It was a long time before he discovered a space which seemed suitable for his purpose, and that was

a long way out of the course as he had determined to take straight back to the caverns. He found the fault in the sparker and went on again. When daylight came he was a long way from the place he had hoped to reach during the dark hours.

Besides being worn out for want of sleep, weary in every limb from his long climb, he was shivering with cold. When at last he came in sight of the caverns and saw the boys standing by the edge of the pit, now filled with burning lava, it almost seemed to him that he could jump into the red mass with a good will.

At last he landed, just above the wreck of the *Sarah*, and the boys fell upon him with shouts and thumpings of great joy! He had not only returned safely. He had requisitioned an aeroplane from the enemy!

"And that is going some!" as Ben exclaimed, after Jimmie, seated close to the evil-smelling pit, had told the story of the night.

"I'll never get warm again!" the boy declared. "And have I got to go without a coat until I get back to Third avenue again?" he added, with a significant twist of his shoulders.

"I'll make you a fur coat!" promised Glenn.

It may be as well to state here that Glenns kept his word, and that from that day forward Jimmie had no need to complain of being thinly, if inartistically, clad!

"And now for the crater!" Havens said, after listening to the talk of the boys. "The quicker you get there the better it will be for us!"

"Who is to go on the first trip?" asked Ben.

"Are you going to the crater?" asked Jimmie, in some surprise.

"I wouldn't miss it if I knew I should lose my leg to pay for it," was the determined reply. "I have worked a good many years to come to this point, and I'm not going to lose the fun now, if I can help it."

"Years?" questioned Ben. "Have you been at it so long?"

"When I was a boy in knickerbockers my father told me of the crater, gave me the maps—which, by the way, we have had little need for, thanks to the Devil's Pool!—and made me promise that, some day, I would try to take the treasure from the mountain. I have virtually given my life to it. If this attempt is a failure, I shall try again."

"Your father saw this gold?" asked Glenn.

"Yes; he was here on a hunting trip and camped on the edge of the big hole one night because it was warmer there. During the night it grew warm enough to satisfy him, I think, for about everything he had in the way of camp supplies was burned. He just escaped with his life."

"But he looked down into the crater? How could he have looked into such a roaring hole as that

must have been, judging from what we have seen of Devil Pool? He must have had his nerve with him!"

"Father always had his nerve with him!" laughed Havens. "When he awoke that night he heard indistinct rumblings under the mountain, but did not think the situation serious. He arose and looked over into the crater, then filling with lava. This lava, he declared, carried gold in large quantities. When he got away from the peril of the place he made a rough map of the place, but could never find it again."

"I can tell you why he could never find it," Glenn interrupted. "The crater we are going to has been extinct for years. It has never, until a few days ago, shown signs of eruption since your father was here."

Havens looked the boy over in astonishment.

"How do you know that?" he asked. "How do you know how long ago it was that my father was here?"

Glenn laughed quietly.

"History!" he said. "Local tradition, which is history when it gets ripe, tells of that visit. The natives know that a Gringo found gold here, and have been looking for it ever since. The crater we are now to investigate, though cold, has been searched a thousand times, no doubt. But the conditions were not right, and no gold was found."

"Of course," Havens went on. "With gold heavier than the other matter forced into the crater, heavier and lying at the bottom, it would not be discovered. When the lava boils, the gold is released, of course, and bubbles up with the rest. When the mass cools, the gold drops to the bottom—and no one knows how far down that bottom is," he added, with a sigh.

"Don't get discouraged!" grinned Jimmie. "I've got another idea!"

"Oh!" cried Ben. "I didn't know there was another idea left in the world! I feel pretty dense this morning."

"Out with this idea!" commanded Havens, with a comical gesture of impatience. "Give it tongue!"

"We're going to cut the gold out in large chunks, without any digging at all," the boy said. "I see it there now!"

"You're seeing things, too, are you?" demanded Carl.

"Let the kid see all the things he can!" Havens put in. "He saw an aeroplane when none of us could! How long will it take those two men to get to us here to claim it?" he added, turning to the boy, proud at the mention of his exploit.

"It would take me a thousand years!" Jimmie answered.

"If they know the country," Glenn hastened to say, "they can get up here by dark. There are

plenty of caverns and passes which will save them many climbs. The lava has burned queer places in these rocks."

"You seem to know the locality pretty well," Havens suggested.

"I have been here ever since I left New York," was the reply. "The very day I reached Zapotlan I was approached by a native who thought I knew about the crater of gold and had the maps. I did not let him know that I then heard of the alleged treasure for the first time. I drew him out until I knew as much of the story as he did, then we came here together and worked together until these rascals came. That was some months ago. Well, we were hunting over the ridges for this crater, and the brigands saw us. We had to compromise with them."

"I see a light!" shouted Ben.

"Yes, that's it!" Glenn went on. "We were obliged to agree to stand together if any others butted into the game. We were to let each other alone, to protect each other, help each other against outsiders. I was told that I would be murdered if I did not keep the promise."

"And so, when we came in," Ben laughed, "you had to keep your hands off until things got so hot you couldn't?"

"That's it. When they called upon me to help defend our fairy dream against a new importation

of Gringos, I did not know that these three boys were with the company, so I went to lasso one of them and so provide an aviator to take the place of one who had been injured by a fall. Before undertaking to capture one of the unknown Gringos," he added, with a wink at Jimmie, "I secured a promise from this man Gregg that no harm should come to the one I took prisoner."

"And why didn't you let us know who you were?" demanded Carl.

"That would have turned the whole pack loose on us," replied Glenn. "I thought I could aid you best by seeming to be working with the bandits who had come in first. But," he went on, "if I wouldn't go to Jimmie, he came to me! The rascal invaded my palace and devoured my fish dinner!"

"And that makes me think we'd better be getting something in the way of sustenance," Jimmie put in. "I'm hungry."

"Yet, or again?" asked Ben.

"Yet!" was the reply. "We'll eat, and then for the air line to the richest gold mine in the world! We'll let Ben take Mr. Havens first, then he can come back after me and Carl. Glenn knows the country so well that he can walk up!"

"Not so you could see it while awake!" roared Glenn. "I'm going up the very first one. "I've camped on the edge of that old hole in the sky, and know all about it! I've been down in the crater

when there was no more show of fire there than there is of a conflagration in the heart of an iceberg. You can't leave me behind, fellows!" he added with a laugh at his own vehemence. "I'm the first one in. I've waited for this for a long time."

Not so long as Mr. Havens has," Jimmie observed. "We're going to put him down first, if he can't go more than an inch!"

"There's no steam or smoke coming from the crater now," Ben said, returning from the outside ledge, "so it may not be worth while to go on up right now. It is when the volcano is active that the gold shows."

"Wait until you get my idea!" Jimmie announced. "Then you'll see."

It was nearing mid-afternoon when, at last, Havens and the four boys stood on the lip of the crater. The summit from which it opened was not the chief summit of the mountain. It was a peak which pointed up from the north slope. The mountain continued on upward for a mile or more.

The crater was "dead as a doornail," as Jimmie expressed it. There were no indications of an eruption, except that the rocks were still warm. Mr. Havens was satisfied with one look into the yawning mouth of the crater. He declared he wouldn't go down into it for all the gold in the world, so the ropes which had been brought were arranged and Glenn started down, all the lads wondering how it

was that the rocks were not still red hot. Down, down went the boy, hanging in the swing which had been put at the end of the rope.

Then, after a time, he called back, joy in his voice:

“Now,” he said, “I know the secret of the crater.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE END OF A LONG SEARCH.

"YOU'RE lucky!" Jimmie called back. "She's kept her secret for a good many centuries!"

"Is there gold down there?" asked Havens.

"Just wait until I get up there," was the unsatisfactory reply.

"If you don't tell us at once," Jimmie answered, "we'll never draw you up. You may live there and feed on lava!"

He rattled the rope as he spoke, and Glenn gave a cry of alarm.

But the mischief had been done! At the moment the boy had shaken the line Glenn had been leaning out of the swing, barely holding on by the ends of his fingers, his weight throwing the rope away to one side. The swaying of the line threw his body forward, his fingers lost their hold, and he fell.

The loss of weight on the line told the boys at the lip of the crater what had happened. Jimmie was nearly frantic at the result of his foolish bit of

by-play, and wanted to climb down the crater at once, but was held back by his chums.

"Wait a moment!" Havens ordered, "until we draw up the rope. Then you may go down in the swing and see what has become of the boy. But you must be careful. Don't lose your head, no matter what you see, or do not see down there."

"I know I'll find him dead!" wailed the boy.

"If he is dead," Ben said, gravely, "you won't find him at all."

It seemed an eternity to Jimmie before the rope was up and he was stepping into the swing. The instant he swung over the crater he observed the odor of coal gas in the air, and the breath of the mountain which touched his face seemed hot and shriveling.

He knew well enough what that meant! The crater was preparing for another period of activity. If Glenn was not rescued instantly, there would be no hope of saving his life. Realizing the situation, he called out to the others to lower rapidly, which they did.

Presently he came to the end of the rope. This was as far down as he could go, and much farther than Glen had gone. The mouth of the crater was so much wider than the interior at the point where the boy swung that the light of day seemed to focus in, and there was no need for him to use the flashlight with which he had provided himself.

The surfaces about him were wrinkled and burned into great pits. The lava had filled some of the former depressions, leaving tolerably smooth benches at the sides of the interior slope. There were pits, however, which the lava had not hardened in. The boy accounted for this by remembering the tunnel through the mountain to the pool.

Without doubt, the holes in the sides led to the other tunnel under the mountain's bulk. From the position he occupied Jimmie could see the bottom of the crater, not so far down as he had expected to find it. It shone like burnished gold.

There was no lava at the bottom at all! There seemed to be nothing there save gold! And the bottom was as level and smooth as the surface of a millpond! Glenn was no where in sight.

Jimmie called his name until the concave crater took up the sound of his voice and sent it whirling around the wrinkles and benches of the odd old treasure house. For a long time there was no answer. Then Glenn's voice reached the boy's anxious ears. That sound, he always insisted, was the most welcome one he had ever heard, or ever expected to hear. It told him that Glenn was still alive, and that he was not a murderer!

"Where are you? Are you hurt?" called Jimmie.

"Hurt nothing!" was the reply. "Tell them to draw you up a few feet and you'll see me in another alcove bedroom!"

This is what had happened: When the rope had been shaken Glenn had lost his balance and fell, striking on the edge of one of the pits in the crater. By great good luck he had been able to hold on until his feet could find a hold on the rough wall below the lip of the depression. Jimmie found him standing on the edge of a bench, with only a very shallow opening behind him.

"You did something when you shook that rope?" asked Glenn.

"Did a foolish thing," was the dejected reply.

"Did a wise thing!" contradicted Glenn. "Look there."

Back of where the boys stood the bench seemed to consist of pure gold! Jimmie drew out his flashlight and turned the circle of flame on other benches, and also on the bottom of the crater.

"Here's for my idea!" he said, in a moment. "Can you hold the rope while I go on down to the bottom, or as near to it as the rope will take me? I want to see a party down there," he added, whimsically.

"Sure," was the reply. "Call to them to let go at the top."

"Then how would we get it up to them again?" demanded Jimmie.

"That's a fact!"

Jimmie leaned outward and called up:

"Got a long cord up there, fellows?"

"You bet we have! How's Glenn?"

"He says he's hungry," Jimmie called back. "Tie the cord to the rope and toss the rope down. We want to use it to go deeper."

In five minutes the end of the rope was in Jimmie's hands.

"Now," the boy said, "take a twist around yourself, and hold on to the air, or anything you can catch hold of, and let me down."

"The bottom is hot," warned Glenn. "The air is almost thick enough to tie a rope to, at that. Be careful!"

"You bet!" the boy laughed, and down he went. In a moment he was calling to be drawn up. The crater was filling with smoke and steam.

The boys above drew up the rope and then Glenn and Jimmie were brought to the top. By this time there were indications of lava at the bottom. The crater would be boiling again in a short time. Havens and Carl were conveyed back to camp by Ben, the machine carrying the load very well.

As the situation was one of great peril, Glenn and Jimmie moved on down the mountainside, now leaping down small drops, now sliding down long slopes. If it was ever in their minds to quit their perilous progress they had only to turn their eyes to the top. There were waving banners of smoke and steam there, and the roaring of escaping gas drowned out all other individual sounds.

"Now," Glenn said, after they had reached a point where the heat of the volcano was not overpowering, "where are we to find a place where Ben can land and pick us up when he comes back for us?"

"We'll have to keep on until we find such a place," was the reply.

"And in the meantime it will come on night, and he'll never find us in the living world—never!"

"Look here!" Jimmie returned. "You can't come into our party and set up as a grouch. We have one. The place is already filled by Ben. You couldn't equal him in the grouch role if you tried a thousand years, so you just quit trying! We can build a fire, can't we? I suppose Ben won't be able to see a blaze pitched a couple of miles above the earth!"

Glenn laughed and declared that the smoke in the crater must have turned his head, or he would have thought of that before."

"What did you find down there?" he finally asked.

"My great idea!" Jimmie answered. "It is a big one!"

"How do I know it is?" grinned Glenn. "What does it get us?"

"It will get me an aeroplane!" Jimmie answered. "But you wait until we get back to camp. Then I'll tell you all about it."

Long before Ben came back with the flying machine dusk had settled over the mountain. The canyons and depressions were clothed in heavy shadows, but on the elevations and peaks the red light of the volcano shone with dazzling radiance.

There was not much to build a fire with, up there on the sloping rocks, but the boys managed to gather enough dead grass to make a blaze visible from the aeroplane, and so Ben picked them off a dangerous bench with little difficulty.

By the time the lads were gathered about a fish dinner provided by Dodo, the whole country was lighted by the volcano.

"Never anything like this before!" Glen said. "The natives have told me that the crater only bubbles, never flames."

"All the better for my great idea!" Jimmie grinned. "You just wait until the lava which fills the pool and the tunnel melts, then you'll see. We're all going to be rich!"

"In our dreams, at a hundred a month!" laughed Carl.

"We've got to make better terms with Mr. Havens!" Jimmie decided.

Havens laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks.

"You're going to hold me up, are you?" he asked.

"No," answered Jimmie, "I'm only going to

assess you for my great big idea! Assess you one half of the value of the find!"

"All right!" Havens replied. "You boys may have half."

"Does that let me in?" asked Glenn. "I saw it first."

"Of course it lets you in," Ben declared. "You saved our lives."

"Nix on that!" warned Glenn. "I don't want any posing here!"

"Come on, now, with the large idea!" Havens urged.

"Well," Jimmie answered, "it isn't much of an idea after all. Only you'll find all the gold in one mass at the bottom of the crater as soon as it cools off. There will be no lava on top of it."

"You're crazy!" laughed Glenn.

"Why do you say that?" asked Havens.

"Why," replied the boy, "the tunnel to the Devil's Pool drained all the lava off while the gold sank to the bottom."

"So far to the bottom that we'll never——"

"Ben has to air his grouch!" Carl laughed.

"Let me tell you right now," Jimmie went on, "that the bottom of the crater is not down in the bowels of the earth. It is about ten feet below the level of the tunnel which leads to Devil Pool."

"Then where does the lava come from?" demanded Havens.

"From another tunnel," was the reply. "Now, you see, the Devil Pool tunnel is full of hardened lava. It will not melt right away, so the crater bubbles over. See? But there is another outlet at the bottom of the crater, so the lava will in time run out, leaving the gold in the bottom. You'll find a chunk of it there as big as the Flatiron building."

The expression was extravagant, but there really was enough gold at the bottom to make the boys all very wealthy. Of course they had to wait several days for the crater to cool, and several weeks for the right kind of machinery to come, and several other weeks for the Mexican government to make up its mind what it ought to tax them for taking the gold out, but in time they returned to New York in the *Sarah*, the *Blade*, and another flying machine ordered from Zapotlan.

The two men who had occupied the night camp Jimmie had run across were never heard of again. It was believed by the natives that they had attempted to enter the blazing crater on the night following the visit of the boys and had perished.

But the lads were not content to sit quietly in New York and live on the proceeds of their adventure. Therefore, they were all pleased when Havens came to them with a proposition to undertake a secret service case for the chief of police.

"The chief thinks," he said, "that you boys ought to be able to capture the men who dynamited the

safe of the Buyers' Bank and murdered the night-watchman. Can you do it? He is said to be somewhere in the Rocky Mountains, and you ought to be able to chase him up with your new flyers. Will you try?"

"Tell us about the robbery and murder first," Jimmie suggested. "Tell us about the people we have to contend against."

"Two of the craftiest criminals in the world," was the reply. "If you'll undertake the task, I'll tell you all about the attack on the bank and the murder of the watchman."

"Go to it!" Ben shouted. "We'll go!"

The story of the expedition will be found in the second volume of this series, entitled:

"The Flying Machine Boys on Duty; or, the Clue Above the Clouds."

THE END.



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